

HOUSE OF THE DRAGON

GAME OF THRONES IS REBORN

SEX

356

**STRANGER
THINGS**

BRINGING VECNA TO LIFE

**TALES
OF THE
WALKING
DEAD**

AN UNDEAD
ANTHOLOGY

**THE
LORD OF
THE RINGS**
THE RINGS OF
POWER BEGINS

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LITTLE DEMON | I AM GROOT | THREE THOUSAND YEARS OF LONGING



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98 TOTAL RECALL

Remember when our world seemed saner than *Eightball's*?

GET IN TOUCH!

First Contact

Hailing Frequencies Open!



OUT OF THE PARK

Mike Garner, email *Jurassic World Dominion* is enjoyable. Just a little thing... the dinos are free-roaming yet they still end up at what is, for want of a better way of describing it, another park. They had enough leads to do most of the film all over the world, showing how different countries were dealing with it. Just seems like a real missed opportunity.

SFX: Covid restrictions were possibly an issue...

YASSS, QUEEN

Roland Robinson, email Congrats on the wonderful *SFX* issue devoted to queer genre content. This was long overdue – a very wonderful and multicoloured issue.

SHORT NEW WORLDS

Keith Tudor, email I really enjoyed the first few episodes of *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds*. The optimism for the future is back, the characters are great, the effects look brilliant, and the standalone episode format is a welcome return. My only complaint is that there's only ten episodes this season, although the knowledge that season two is currently filming helps.

HIT THE ROAD?

Paul Drinkwater, email Why don't you do a feature on visiting filming locations such as Devils Tower from *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*?

I've visited the States quite a few times and been to quite a lot of filming locations – some not worth the 200 mile detour but even so, it's nice to say to people when watching a film "I've been there!"

SFX: We'll get back to you on that one, Paul. Bit busy at the moment sculpting a pile of mashed potato. This means something. This is important...



On *Westworld* season four:
The impact of character death has lost all significance when you can revive them as a host.

Joh Dominic



Loved *Stranger Things* S4, but with every question answered they're shrinking the world. Now it's all connected and it doesn't feel the same.

@HorusDin

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SFX

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Rants & Raves

Inside the SFX hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ San Diego Comic-Con was a blast. Absolutely great to be back in the room again. The events and activations were top notch – coming face to face with Walkers and the *Star Trek* cast over two nights was quite something. → Saw the first episode of *Gremlins: Secrets Of The Mogwai* – viewers are in for a treat!

RANTS

→ Let's get more studios back at SDCC too next year please – there's so much genre "content" out there and the fans want to see it represented!

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ Excited about seeing *The Wrath Of Khan* on the big screen (it's reissued on 2 September). → I've waited 23 years for a new sci-fi/horror film by David Cronenberg, and finally it's almost here (*Crimes Of The Future*, 9 September). Though if it turns out he's not available for interview, my heart may break. → Speaking of horror auteurs, it'd be nice if Dario Argento's *Dark Glasses* (screening at Frightfest) is a return to form.

RANTS

→ Frustrating how belated the announcements about US shows coming to UK services are. Incidentally: *From*, *Lodge 49* and *La Brea* are now available via Sky Sci-Fi, AMC UK and Paramount+ respectively...

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

→ Thankfully last season's heart-wrenching and brutal finale hasn't lessened the appeal of *For All Mankind* in season three. Still one of my all-time favourite sci-fi shows. → Hope *Andor* puts *Star Wars* back on track!

ED RICKETTS PRODUCTION EDITOR

RAVES

→ I know a lot of people have given up on *Westworld* as being too complicated, but to me it has always seemed like a rare example of a series being properly plotted out from the beginning. The creators said from day one that five seasons was the goal.

RANTS

→ As far as I know Martin Scorsese hasn't made a musical, so I wonder which other director *Joker 2* will rip off "pay homage" to?

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR-AT-LARGE

RAVES

→ A treat to see the '60s Dalek movies back on the big screen. We don't talk enough about how incredible those Skaro landscapes are – one of cinema's most evocative alien worlds. → Happy the *Fantastic Four* movie finally has a release date. Now announce the casting so everyone can get the bitching out of the way.

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ *Paper Girls* is a treat. The adaptation of the comic is cast perfectly and you can see Cliff Chiang's influence in the look of the show. → One of my animation favourites, *Primal*, is back for a second season. It's just as brutal, viscerally and emotionally, as ever.

"Prepare yourself for Warp 10 excitement!"



Captain's Log



As I write this I'm 35,000ft above the United States of America, flying back from San Diego Comic-Con with only a few short hours before this issue of *SFX* goes to the printers. Talk about cutting it fine! But, you know, we're an efficient bunch of Doozers so "the moment has been prepared for". What a week!

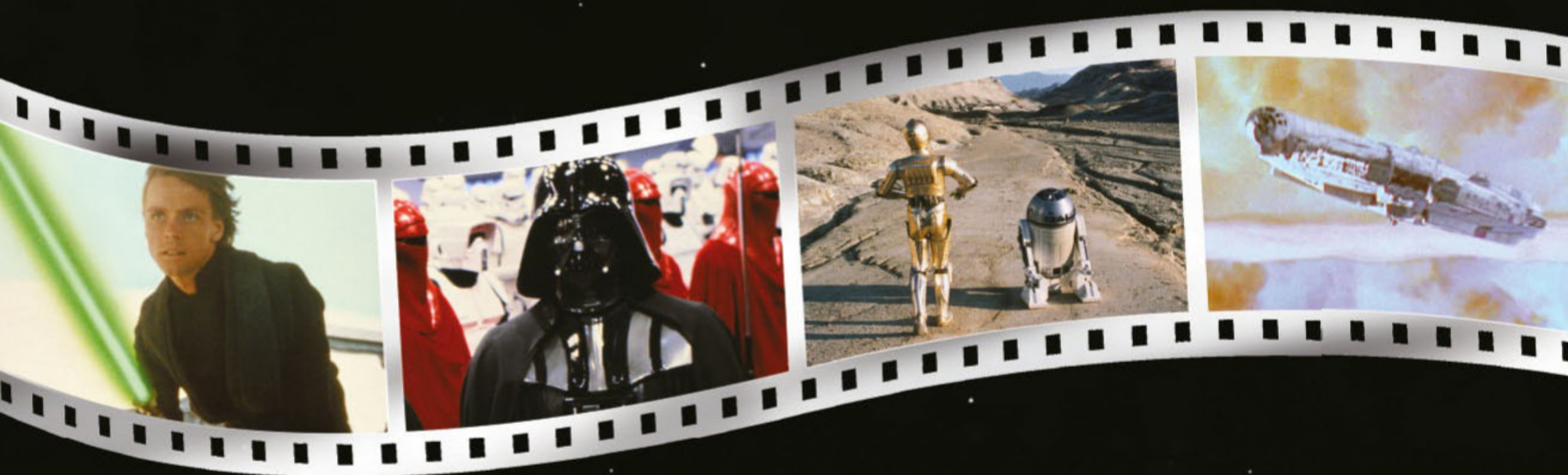
SDCC really is a life-changing experience. This was my second time attending – thank you very much Covid – and it's such a joy seeing the streets of the city absolutely filled with fans, all celebrating a love of pop culture entertainment. And those panels and announcements! You can check out the extensive coverage over at gamesradar.com and, of course, our very own Twitter and Instagram @sfxmagazine, as well as read more on shows like *The Rings Of Power* and *House Of The Dragon* in these very pages. We'll also have more for you in the next issue as a slew of new season shows start to arrive.

There's truly something so exciting about the shared experience of being with fellow fans as news of upcoming films and series are announced, as well as knowing that we'll get to bring all these things to you in the magazine over the coming years. Though I admit I do wonder how we're going to fit in all in the mag, let alone get time to watch them... The geeks truly did inherit the Earth, and for that I'll always be grateful. Stay safe and we'll see you in four weeks!

Darren X

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SEPTEMBER
2022



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DAY SHIFT

It's slay for pay in
Jamie Foxx's new
action-packed
vampire movie

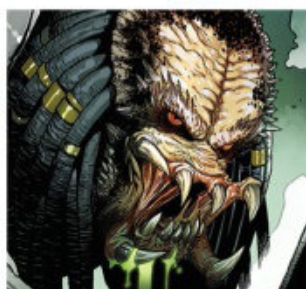
Highlights



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LOCKE & KEY

→ Time to close those magical doors for good as the Netflix series comes to an end. Sob.



12

PREDATOR

→ What a massive hunt! The tables have turned for the deadly aliens in the new Marvel comic.



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TALES OF THE WALKING DEAD

→ The world of the Walkers just got bigger than ever with a new anthology series.



LOCKE & KEY'S SECOND SEASON saw the Locke siblings – Tyler (Connor Jessup), Kinsey (Emilia Jones) and Bode (Jackson Robert Scott) – embracing their destinies as keepers of the mystical keys. These objects of power allowed them to vanquish their fiendish foe, Dodge (Laysla De Oliveira), who had taken the form of Kinsey's love interest, Gabe (Griffin Gluck).

Showrunners Carlton Cuse and Meredith Averill wanted the third and final season to be rooted in family, to explore what these supernatural artifacts actually represent and to raise the stakes even higher than ever.

"The Lockes always claimed the keys as their own," Averill tells Red Alert. "The reality is they are made of demons. We enjoyed digging into that complication, this idea that they can be used for good, but they can also be used for bad. And there's the notion that the Lockes' duty was to restore order to the world after the Black Door, a gateway to another realm, had been opened."

When the show returns, Tyler has left. His girlfriend Jackie (Genevieve Kang) had previously died in his arms after being possessed by a demon. That has crushed his spirit. And, since when an individual becomes an 18-year-old adult they lose their link to magic, Tyler made the choice to lead a normal life away from the Lockes. But duty calls...

"We will eventually see Tyler come back and be torn between these two worlds: committing to a new life or reclaiming his legacy as a

"Look at this little idiot in his stupid hat. Ha!"

SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

Locking Up

Locke & Key's showrunners reveal the final battle of good versus evil



Nina Locke discovers the Snow Globe key.



Kevin Durand as Gideon: he's a right wrong 'un.

Locke," Averill says. "Also, how does that challenge his relationships with his siblings, particularly Kinsey? We think that relationship is so strong, so it was about being able to write that story and how they are not quite able to connect in the same way. It's kind of heartbreaking, especially for her."

MADE OF DEMONS

In Tyler's absence, Kinsey must step up. She assumes more of a leadership role. As for Bode, he's never truly processed his feelings of guilt over losing his dad. So when a new man enters his mum's life, Bode isn't exactly thrilled. In the meantime, the youngster begins to actively search for new keys – with disastrous results.

"Bode finds a new key in episode two," Cuse says. "He is enjoying mastering the keys, but that confidence gets him in a lot of trouble. That will have some dangerous consequences for our kids. He's still the same old Bode, but he's wrestling with more this season."

Plenty of trouble still lies ahead. Eden (Hallea Jones) summoned Frederick Gideon (Kevin Durand), a former captain of British soldiers in colonial Massachusetts, who was possessed by a vengeful demon. The greatest threat the Lockes have ever faced, Gideon is hell-bent on collecting the keys for his own nefarious purposes. And while Dodge proved to be a master manipulator, Gideon has no patience for subtlety.

"In some ways, that can make Gideon more dangerous because he won't hesitate to do what needs to be done," says Averill. "Even as a mortal, he had the power to open up the Black Door for the very first time. Then he was hit by a demon bullet."

"You have this powerful mortal, combined with this demon bullet, and that makes him the most formidable villain yet."

Outside of the characters and family drama, a major component of the series are the keys. A variety of them have been hidden – and



"Look, it is not a girly diary, it's a journal."



"We collaborated with creator Joe Hill on the creation of the Snow Globe Key," Averill adds. "That came from his amazing, insane brain, both in designing what that world looked like and the execution of it. That came out really well."

Cuse (*Bates Motel*, *Lost*) and Meredith (*The Haunting Of Hill House*, *Star-Crossed*) aren't exactly novices when it comes to series finales. With *Locke & Key*, the two were seeking to find emotional closure for the characters, while rewarding the audience for the fantastical ride they have taken.

"In a world where shows are rebooted constantly, would we be thrilled in five, 10, 15 years to come back to see what all our Lockes are up to? Absolutely," Averill says. "So we wouldn't ever want to tie everything up with such a bow that it was impossible to untie."

"At the same time, we wanted a satisfying and surprising ending to our story. And to make you cry. I feel we accomplished that." **BC**

Locke & Key is on Netflix now.

“We collaborated with creator Joe Hill on the creation of the Snow Globe Key”

found – throughout the Locke ancestral home. Familiar ones such as the Anywhere Key and the Chain Key come into play again. But two new keys, that figure prominently, could soon emerge as fan favourites.

"The Timeshift Key was fun this year," Cuse says. "The idea that there is a key that allows you to move around in time... Everyone is talking about the dangers involved in using it, and then we do see the consequences. The keys are at their best when they can do something amazing, but the thing that they do also has consequences."

Bode Locke is apparently having a whale of a time.



► SCI-FACT! A new comic book series, *World War Key*, is still in the works, with 37 issues planned.

SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

Holding The Baby

Resident Alien gets some new visitors in the second half of season two

Suddenly, Harry's surrounded by kids.

THE MID-SEASON CLIFFHANGER FOR *Resident Alien*'s second season had alien Harry Vanderspeigle (Alan Tudyk) in the woods with Asta (Sara Tomko), who had just saved him from the bullet of some mystery bad guy. D'Arcy (Alice Wetterlund) arrived to see the aftermath of Asta's expert marksmanship, with Sheriff Mike (Corey Reynolds) soon to arrive.

The return of the series on Syfy in the US for eight new episodes will have the secrets of Patience, Colorado getting more complex and layered, including Harry tracking a baby alien that's on the loose. Executive producer/showrunner Chris Sheridan tells Red Alert that the action picks right up where they left off.

"It did create a really good launching point into the second half of the season, and a really great cliffhanger," Sheridan says of the big dinner party episode where secrets were spilled and a dead body resulted. "This is very much a new season, though it's thematically connected to the first half of season two."

In New York City, Harry was gifted the alien egg and only part of a dire message left by another

alien of his kind, which sounded like it was a major warning. Sheridan says there will be a lot more when it comes to the alien storyline in this new block of episodes.

"Coming into episode nine is akin to a human who suddenly has someone else's baby left on their doorstep," Sheridan laughs about Harry's new predicament. "[The story] does such great work for Harry building his emotional template. Having a baby in your life, whether it's your own, or whether someone leaves it on your doorstep, does an awful lot to you emotionally.

"Watching Harry take the next step of his humanity, learning that next level of love, which is that deep love for something helpless, like a child, and realising that you're a caretaker now, and how that accelerates your humanity... It's going to be interesting but also fun to watch Harry go through that."

It should also prove wryly amusing watching Harry having to tangle with a small version of his own species, given that human children like Max (Judah Prehn) and Sahar (Gracelyn Awad Rinke) already vex him so much. Sheridan laughs. "Harry is



“All of the characters, in one way or another, are being pulled into the alien nature of the show”

searching for this baby for the sole purpose of needing to get information from it.”

The close-knit circle of Patience folks will also start to get more curious about the strange happenings in their neck of the woods. “In the second half of the season, one of the big things that’s happening – and it’s happening naturally – is that all of the characters, in one way or another, are slowly being pulled into the alien nature of the show,” Sheridan teases. In particular, Deputy Liv (Elizabeth Bowen), who had her own UFO sighting as a kid shown in flashback, is now following her gut instinct about the weirdness going on in town, and calls for outside help.

“Liv called the alien tracker,” Sheridan says of her mysterious cliffhanger call. “And he’ll come to Patience because she’s sure there’s alien activity there. So we will see more of Terry O’Quinn [as Peter Bach], who will show up in the second half of the season searching for an alien.”

Taking that action also puts Liv on the road towards finally coming to terms with believing that aliens are real, despite feeling self-conscious about it. “That’s very, very tied into a lot of things that are happening now in the UFO

world,” Sheridan says. “For years, these people have seen things and people make fun of them and think they’re crazy.

“And by the way, the government now saying, ‘Yeah, there’s UFOs. We don’t know what they are,’ seems to have gotten very little reaction from the press,” Sheridan says as a serious aside. “Do people not care any more?”

He promises that the show *will* care as matters come to more of a head, both cosmically and personally. But expect a lot of laughs too. “We have on this show something that most other shows don’t have, which is comedy,” he says. “Comedy carries an energy that is similar to plot reveals. Even if there’s a moment where there’s not a lot going on story-wise, if Harry is doing something ridiculous and funny then we’re sitting on the edge of our seats.”

And Sheridan promises there are some big twists to come too. “The first half of season two did have a great cliffhanger, but the second half of season two has an *incredible* cliffhanger – I would argue possibly even better than the other one. I’m very excited for people to see it.” **TB**

Resident Alien is on Syfy from 10 August. UK details TBC.



NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

→ MCU update: **Thunderbolts** targets 28 July 2024 release, **Fantastic Four** 8 November 2024. **Avengers: The Kang Dynasty** set for 2 May 2025, **Avengers: Secret Wars** 7 November 2025.

→ *The Cloverfield Paradox*’s Julius Onah signed to direct **Captain America: New World Order**, starring Anthony Mackie.

→ Chris Hemsworth is the villain in *Fury Road* prequel **Furiosa**.

→ Adam Wingard’s **Godzilla Vs Kong** sequel set for 15 March 2024.

→ Russell Crowe set to cast out the spirits in **The Pope’s Exorcist**.

→ *Jurassic Park*’s David Koepp writing **The Green Hornet And Kato**.

The Invisible Man’s Leigh Whannell in talks to direct.

→ Lea Seydoux playing Lady Margot Fenring in **Dune: Part Two**.

→ Finn Wolfhard and Billy Bryk co-directing horror-comedy **Hell Of A Summer**.

→ Paramount adapting Valiant Comics superpowers tale **Harbinger**.

→ Dennis Quaid and David Thewlis starring in tech thriller **Littlemouth**.

→ Dean Fleischer Camp directing live-action/CG **Lilo & Stitch**.



ROY ROCHLIN/STRINGER/GETTY

► **SCI-FACT!** We’ll definitely see that season 2B cliffhanger resolved, as a third season has been confirmed.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Hunting High

Another comic shimmers into view as **Predator** makes its Marvel debut

► COINCIDING WITH small-screen prequel *Prey*, extraterrestrial hunters the Yautja are returning to comics in a new Marvel series. But while the latest film takes place in the past, writer Ed Brisson and artist Kev Walker are locating their story in the near future.

“In the first couple of movies, it was implied that the Predators came to Earth on a schedule, more or less, and I wanted to explore their other hunting grounds and routes,” reasons Brisson. “In order to do that, we needed a setting that allowed for that level of space travel, which meant that we needed to set the book in the

future. However, for reasons that will likely become clear as the series progresses, we didn’t want to set it *too* far in the future.”

“It was the near-future setting that swung it for me, as it’s a chance to steer away from anything that’s been done before – in the movies at least – but it also means that I don’t have to be quite so slavish with the details,” adds Walker. “If it’s in the future for human technology, then it’s also in the future for Predator tech, so although there are plenty of cool nods to what’s been before, I wasn’t so bound, for example, by the look of the Predator armour.”



With Brisson noting that “with most Predator stories, you can’t write them as the central characters. They’re the threat, boogymen, and the less we see of them the better,” the story is told from the perspective of Theta, who is pursuing the Yautja across the galaxy after seeing them slaughter her family at a young age. “When she was a child, Theta was brought along on an exploratory mission by her parents, who alongside the rest of the crew were wiped out by a

Predator – although 12-year-old Theta was spared,” explains Brisson. “For 15 years, she’s been scouring planets, tracking Predators, looking to get revenge for the death of her parents. It’s not been an easy journey and she carries the scars from each encounter – at some point, she lost a leg to one – but she’s managed to turn herself into a real problem for the Predators, which has not gone unnoticed.”

“Theta does a lot of growing up, which we never really show,”

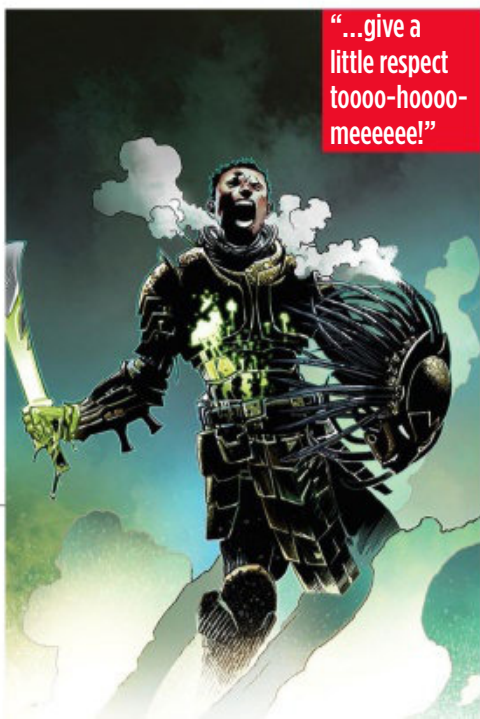
► **SCI-FACT!** Actors Billy Dee Williams, Anthony Daniels and Kelly Marie Tran return to voice their movie characters for the special.



continues Walker. “We see her as a child and then we jump to 20 years later, so there’s a whole lot of character development no one gets to see, but I ended up creating just for myself to shape the character. She was raised by an AI, with very little human contact, so her social skills are limited. I purposely made her androgynous because I didn’t think there’d be any imposition of stereotypical male or female roles. She’s shaped by one thing... revenge! She’s resourceful and has plenty of time to prepare for her encounters. So the Yautja don’t really have the element of surprise.”

While Brisson says that “we won’t be seeing any familiar faces”, a crossover with the Predator’s old adversaries could be on the cards. “There are definitely some call-backs and references later in the series,” he teases. “As for *Alien*, I guess we’ll have to wait and see...” **SJ**

Predator issue one is out now.



WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Halcyon Days

Slap on the factor 50 - **Lego Star Wars Summer Vacation** has three new adventures to tell



➔ WHAT BETTER WAY TO END THE summer than with a galactic road trip for the heroes and villains of *Star Wars*? *Lego Star Wars Summer Vacation*, the third original special set after the events of *Star Wars: The Rise Of Skywalker*, offers just that. For this adventure, Finn collects Rey, Poe, Rose, Chewie, BB-8, R2-D2 and C-3PO for a much-needed holiday aboard Galactic Starcruiser the Halcyon. When the gang leaves him to do their own things, Finn gets counselled by a trio of familiar Force Ghosts who have some wisdom, and hilarious stories, to share.

Back to craft this adventure is executive producer/screenwriter David Shayne, who tells Red Alert that this special came about right after they completed 2021’s *Lego Star Wars Terrifying Tales*. “We just started talking about what could we do next, then thinking it’d be fun to do a road trip with the *Star Wars* gang,” Shayne says. “And wouldn’t it be funny to see different characters going on vacation?”

Finn gets to be the central character this time, after Rey and Poe headlined prior specials. “We realised it’s natural to this character to want to support the group and want to bring the group together,” he explains. “We also liked this idea that they had saved the galaxy and so they were taking some time off, but what does that look like? We’re also playing up Finn’s self-awareness as he’s becoming a Jedi, and with his Force sensitivity he sees these Force Ghosts.”

Much like they used Vader’s Castle in *Terrifying Tales* as the backdrop to tell three original stories, in this special the Halcyon is the framing device for new stories about Obi-Wan’s Max Rebo Band sing-along at Jabba’s Palace, Anakin remembering Darth Vader and the Emperor’s Scarif Beach Party, and the Solo/Organa’s last family camping trip before Ben goes to train with Luke.

“Obi-Wan Kenobi is this fierce warrior who’s been relentless and has never taken time off, so what does that look like?” Shayne adds. “And what does it look like to watch the Han Solo/Leia Organa family go on vacation? And any time you get to do Lego Darth Vader and the Emperor together, that’s just a natural.”

The Scarif story also features a performance by “Weird Al” Yankovic as Vic Vankoh, who performs the original song ‘Scarif Beach Party’, which the two villains hate. Shayne, however, loves the sequence, and getting the chance to write Yankovic into a Lego story.

“When we started thinking about musical numbers and who we could get to do it, we said, ‘Wouldn’t it be great if we could get it Weird Al to perform a song?’, and we got him!” he enthuses.

Asked if this is the end of the Lego specials, Shayne says that they were conceived as a trilogy but the more audiences watch and are enthusiastic, the more stories they can tell. “It’s an incredibly fun world and I’m always sure there’s more to explore.” **TB**

Lego Star Wars Summer Vacation is on Disney+ now.





DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Power Pack

Charlie
(second from
left) and his
besties.

The kids-friendly **Secret Headquarters** leans more towards *Sky High* than *Kick-Ass*

➔ BACK IN 2020, *PROJECT POWER*'S gritty take on the superhero genre captured the attention of Jerry Bruckheimer. The uber-producer consequently offered co-directors Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman *Secret Headquarters*, a fun, fantastical and kid-friendly superhero romp. In other words, it's the complete antithesis of the duo's previous dark endeavour.

"We always had it on our bucket list to make the kind of movie that we really loved as kids, like a *Goonies*, an *ET*, an *Adventures In Babysitting* or a *Labyrinth*... One of those movies that really tapped into our imaginations as kids," Joost tells Red Alert. "With the original script by Chris Yost, who is a great comic book writer, we were just like 'This idea is so great'. We pitched some changes to the

script and Jerry was like, 'Okay, when can you start?'"

It's 2022, and the most famous superhero in the world, the Guard, has made the world a safer place. *Secret Headquarters* follows Charlie Kincaid (Walker Scobell), a regular teen who is slightly small for his age. He serves as the relief pitcher on his baseball team. And he wishes for more quality time with his workaholic father Jack (Owen Wilson). For his birthday, Charlie can't wait to hang out with his father... then dad gets called away on business again. But an impromptu celebration changes Charlie's life forever.

"Charlie is disappointed," Joost says. "This always happens. Charlie pretends he is getting picked up by his mom, but actually his four friends are coming over

for a little 'rager', even though they don't know what a rager is. So, they are having this party alone at dad's house and then Charlie discovers this secret door behind the bookcase in dad's office, which leads to a secret headquarters. It clearly belongs to the Guard, who may or may not be his dad." Such spaces are a staple in superhero sagas. Think Batman's Batcave, the





"How many times have I told you, this is not a toy!"



The kids enter the Blockbusters themed room.



Jesse Williams and Michael Peña play the baddies.



Owen Wilson as the Guard: "Dude, I'm, like, super."

Fantastic Four's Baxter Building or Superman's Fortress of Solitude. In this case, the Guard's HQ contains futuristic gadgets and one sweet means of transportation that the kids cannot resist firing up.

"There's a very special vehicle, which is the old family VW camper van, that has been modified with alien technology," explains Joost. "They take it for a joyride, and that is what alerts the bad guys to the location of the secret headquarters. On the second day of the story, it gets attacked. Now the kids are alone in the headquarters and they have to defend themselves. Of course, the kids grow closer together and realise they can be heroes, too.

"In order to figure out the design of the headquarters, we wanted to figure out how it was built," he adds. "What we landed on was that in the opening scene, Jack receives this alien power source from a crashed UFO. That's the thing that drives all of his technology and all of his superpowers. It's like an infinite power source, and there's also a computer full of alien knowledge."

Jack basically wears a supersuit, a la Iron Man. But before he perfected the current model, there was plenty of trial and error. The kids mess around with those initial prototypes, which they rely on to defend the lair from the bad guys.

"Each kid has their own gadget they become specialists with," Joost explains. "The way that we thought about it was each gadget was a deconstructed supersuit. There's a jetpack. There's a device you put on your wrist that gives you super-strength or lets you blast lasers. There's an old motorcycle jacket that creates shields. If you put all these things together, they would make version one of a supersuit."

Michael Peña plays the villainous Ansel Argon, a bitter tech giant who runs the weapons company Argon Industries. His goal? Snatch the Guard's advanced technology and implement it into his own designs.

"Ansel is finding his sales are declining all over the world because the Guard has ushered in this new era of peace and tranquility," Joost says. "There's less conflict. Things get solved more easily. He's kind of going out of business because of the Guard. He knows that there's no way the Guard can do everything he does with existing technology, so he must have something."

Both *Secret Headquarters* and *Project Power* could see further instalments. Joost says that spin-off stories have been percolating for the latter. As for *Secret Headquarters*, it's all up to the audience.

"We are starting to have a couple of funny ideas for a sequel, if people want to see one," he concludes. "The characters are so much fun. I think the kids are only 13. You could see this going for a long time." **BC**

Secret Headquarters is on Paramount+ from 13 August.

WRITER/DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Turning The Tables

They/Them fulfills John Logan's dream of making a queer-heroic slasher film



IT'S TOUGH TO FIND AN ORIGINAL YET organic backdrop for a modern horror story any more, especially for a slasher film. But for queer writer/director John Logan, there's a particular scenario that he's long had his eye on for exploration: gay conversion camps.

These controversial enclaves are meant to "turn" homosexual teens towards straight lives through a variety of physical and psychological tactics. Logan tells Red Alert that the experiences of friends who endured these camps inspired his directorial debut for Blumhouse, *They/Them*.

"I was struck by the monstrosity of it," Logan says of the practice. "Sometimes it was done in a religious setting, and sometimes in a secular setting. But it always seemed to me to be a horror movie, because most of these places are camps. They're set apart. They're in the desert or they're in the mountains.

"They're away from civilisation, such as the familiar Camp Crystal Lake," he says, referencing the *Friday The 13th* setting. "It seemed like this is a slasher movie waiting to be written, where the 'monster' is not the person wielding the knife. It's the people who have control over these kids."

The horror genre is one that Logan admits having a complicated relationship with, because of the genre's historic treatment of LGBTQ+ characters. "When I was growing up and I was watching horror movies in the '70s and '80s – all through the first and second slasher cycle – queer characters were mostly non-existent. And if they did exist, they were victims, or they were jokes. In some subconscious way, that hurt me and it bothered me. And that really stayed with me."

So the idea of writing a movie that he wishes had existed when he was 15 held huge appeal. "I wanted to write a movie where not only would you have one queer hero, but you'd have seven of them," he enthuses. "So that was the idea, to do a celebration of people like myself, in my very favourite genre."

They/Them is a contemporary story about a small group of gay campers compelled, for various reasons, to attend Camp Whistler, which is run by Owen (Kevin Bacon) and Dr Cora Whistler (Carrie Preston). As soon as they arrive,

So who's going to survive? Place your bets now.

Owen and Dr Cora have your best interests at heart.



trans teen Jordan (Theo Germaine) is gender-shamed regarding cabin assignments, which sparks a path of rebellion. In preparing to direct, Logan says he had a joyous binge of "every slasher movie ever made. I was discovering bits and pieces from *Sleepaway Camp*, *The Burning*, or from the first three *Friday The 13th* movies,"





NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED
INFORMATION

→ **Strange New Worlds** and **Lower Decks** set for crossovers.

→ William Shatner joining voice cast of **Masters Of The Universe: Revolution**.

→ Charlie Cox and Vincent D'Onofrio reprising Daredevil and the Kingpin in **Daredevil: Born Again**.

→ Gemma Chan starring in time-travel series **The Moon Represents My Heart**.

→ Sarah Michelle Gellar joining **Teen Wolf** spin-off **Wolf Pack**.

→ **Stranger Things**' the Duffer Brothers to adapt Stephen King/Peter Straub's **The Talisman**.

→ **Gen V** is the title of **The Boys**' spin-off show.

→ Jeff Goldblum replacing Hugh Grant as Zeus in Netflix's mythological comedy **Kaos**.

→ **Solo's** Alden Ehrenreich joining Marvel's **Ironheart** series.

→ **Stranger Things** stage play in development, directed by **Billie Elliot's** Stephen Daldry.

→ Nicolas Cage voicing Lord Highfire the dragon in Eoin Colfer adap **Highfire**.

→ Prime Video axing Sissy Spacek and JK Simmons's **Night Sky** after just one season.



JACOPO M. RAULE/STRINGER/GETTY



he enthuses. “Then I worked for months with Lyn Moncrief, our DP, storyboarding the whole movie, planning out every single shot of every single day. We had a plan in mind. So, it was a combination of my own deep dive back into slasher-dom, and spending a lot of time with the cast.”

Logan was advised by director friends like Ridley Scott and Sam Mendes that casting was key to a successful first film, so he spent a lot of time finding his relatively unknown campers, as well as the adults running the camp.

“I actually wrote it with two actors in mind, which I almost never do,” Logan admits. “Darwin del Fabro, who plays Gabriel, I knew from the theatre. And when I was writing Owen Whistler, I just kept hearing and seeing Kevin Bacon. That voice and that face just kept occurring to me.

“Thankfully, Kevin liked the part. And then it was a very long process casting to find just the right people. To me, the big thing was, ‘Who is Jordan?’ And then I met Theo Germain, thank goodness. They were so generous with their experience and with their life. I knew I’d found the

actor around which I could build the entire story.” Logan then made the most of rare rehearsal time to integrate the veteran adult actors with the young actors, and work the tone of the material as a group.

If anyone is concerned that *They/Them* is more message than scares, Logan says the prologue sets the tone. “Every opening is gonna be important, but this is to prove my horror movie cred,” he teases. “I purposely played into every trope you can imagine. It’s a person, alone, in the dark, in the forest, in a car and there’s something scary. And when it came to filming that, it was terrifying. There’s an animal involved, there’s stunts, there’s blood, and we reveal the killer’s mask for the first time.

“It was a bit like a three-ring circus, that opening six or seven minutes of the film, but I’m very, very happy with it. I think it says to the horror fans: this is a person who loves slasher movies, this is a person who honours this genre and now let’s turn the genre on its head.” **TB**

They/Them is on Peacock now. UK details are TBC.

► **SCI-FACT!** John Logan created the series *Penny Dreadful* and wrote the James Bond films *Skyfall* and *Spectre*.

► **SCI-FACT!** One confirmed returning familiar face is Rocket, who features in the first short, “Magnum Opus”.

He is Groot.
But you
probably
knew that.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Branching Out

The baby Flora colossus is back with five short adventures in **I Am Groot**



WE’VE SEEN SEVERAL growth stages of Groot (voiced by Vin Diesel) across the Marvel Cinematic Universe, from *Guardians Of The Galaxy* through to *Thor: Love And Thunder*. But let’s be real: the Baby Groot iteration is the one that delights audiences most. Since we didn’t get much quality time with the whippersnapper, Marvel Studios is giving us five unseen adventures in the Disney+ original shorts series *I Am Groot*.

The series is executive-produced by James Gunn, and written and directed by Kirsten Lepore, known for her indie animated shorts. Lepore tells Red Alert that Marvel Studios asked her to come in for a general meeting, where she was asked to pitch her take on a Baby Groot

shorts series. Her ideas impressed the executives and together they crafted *I Am Groot* to fill in some gaps that the movies weren’t able to show audiences.

“We landed on five standalone shorts where you are just plopped right into a day in the life of Groot’s childhood, which I think is really lovely and wonderful,” Lepore says about the structure of the series. “It just gave us such a huge sandbox to play with for the stories that we could tell. But we really wanted to focus mostly on what are the universal childhood experiences that we all have. And then how do we make it weird and make it Groot and make it sci-fi?”

Since James Gunn introduced Baby Groot in his first *Guardians* film, he was part of the development process from the

start. “We did have several meetings with him where we got to talk about just who is this character,” Lepore says. “That was really, really informative. And all the things that James told me about who that character should be, I kept in the back of my head throughout the whole series and kept coming back to it. Because we really are defining this character more than he’s ever been defined.

“But it’s interesting, because we only have three minutes in which to tell these stories, which is not a lot of time,” she continues. “That’s probably the biggest challenge that we kept coming up against. We just want to tell these five, 10, 15-minute epics, but we really needed to make them bite-size and quick and fun. And even though it’s only three minutes, we tell a complete story in each one.”

Crank up
the merch
machine,
boys!

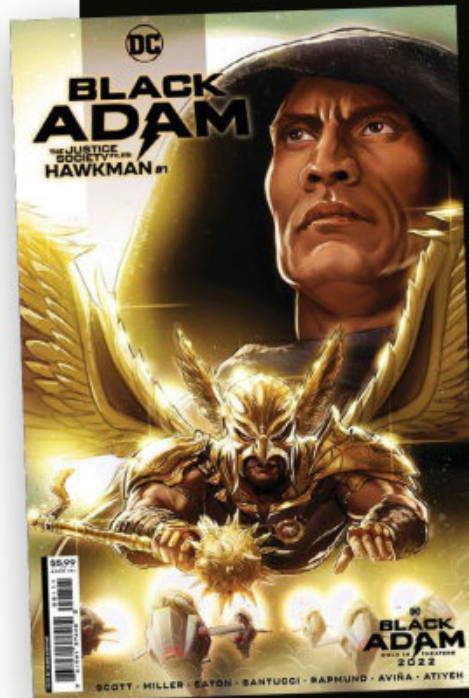


► **SCI-FACT!** Created by Sheldon Mayer and Gardner Fox, the JSA debuted in 1940's *All-Star Comics* issue three.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Ancient World's Finest

DC's oldest superteam gets ready for its movie debut in **Black Adam: The Justice Society Files**



AHEAD OF THE ROCK'S BIG-SCREEN debut as the Destroyer of this World in October, DC Comics is releasing *Black Adam: The Justice Society Files*, a new four-part miniseries set in the cinematic continuity. Written by Cavan Scott and drawn by a variety of artists including Scott Eaton, Maria Laura Sanapo, Travis Mercer and Jesus Merino, the main feature in each issue focuses on a different member of the historic super-team: Hawkman, Cyclone, Doctor Fate and Atom-Smasher, brought to life respectively by Maxine Hunkell, Pierce Brosnan and Al Rothstein in the movie.

"The overarching theme is that we get to see Hawkman reforming the Justice Society, or at least putting out the feelers to heroes new and old," says Scott, who's a long-time fan of the super-squad. "The Society is such a cornerstone of the DC Universe, and for me personally, Hawkman and Doctor Fate were part of my introduction to the DC superhero pantheon. Both remain two of my favourite characters, so it's been fascinating to see them reinterpreted for the film. And as a lifelong James Bond fan, I'm in double-O heaven to have now written a comic with Pierce Brosnan on the cover!"

With the writer noting that "there's an old-time serial feel to Adrianna's story, so even though it isn't set in the '40s, there's a nod to the adventure stories of the time," Bryan Q Miller and artist Marco Santucci are collaborating on the back-ups, which chronicle the journey of Teth-Adam (aka Black Adam) from ancient Egyptian slave to all-powerful anti-hero. "Our tale is about the dangers of

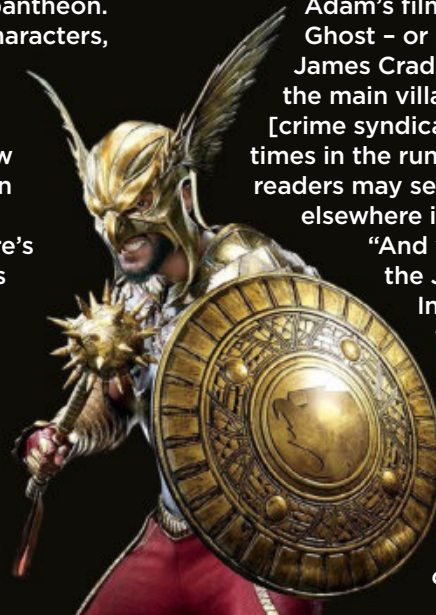
history repeating itself, as told through events that happen in ancient Kahndaq with Teth-Adam and his son, Hurut, in parallel to some shenanigans with Adrianna Tomaz and her family in present-day Kahndaq," explains Miller, referring to Black Adam's wife, aka Isis. "We meet Adrianna in a very unexpected place at the top of the *Black Adam* film, so this was a really fun opportunity to backtrack through the breadcrumbs that got her there. There's also a little bit of Teth family stuff, but we were careful to not – no pun intended – steal any of the film story's thunder."

With both scribes promising "some fun little Easter eggs," expect to find some intriguing links between Scott and Miller's respective scenarios. "The main element is the coming of Black Adam, which is something that runs through all of my stories," teases Scott, who also explores the background of some of Black

Adam's filmic adversaries. "Gentleman Ghost – or at least a new version of James Craddock's otherworldly villain – is the main villain of the Hawkman issue, and [crime syndicate] Intergang turn up a few times in the run. Behind Hawkman, long-term readers may see a few familiar concepts from elsewhere in the DC universe."

"And while Cavan gets to play with the JSA side of the coin, I've got Intergang making a mess of things for Adrianna and her family in Kahndaq," adds Miller, who hints at neat references "for fans who know about Intergang." **SJ**

Black Adam – The Justice Society Files: Cyclone is out now.



Each story is Baby Groot-centric, but Lepore says there are plenty of new characters too, like her creations, the Grunes. "They have these little, simple bodies with four eyes and a mouth. When I see them, I'm like, 'That's a Kirsten character right there!' When we were designing it, I felt like I was getting away with designing a character that was that much my style of character design. But everyone loves them."

And she promises that fans of the Guardians and the MCU will get to see some familiar faces in the episodes. "I think fans will be excited to see some worlds and some characters that they will recognise," she teases. **TB**

I Am Groot is on Disney+ from 10 August.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Foxx Hunting

Jamie Foxx raises the stakes in vampire movie **Day Shift**

➔ **NOSFERATU**, THE QUINTESSENTIAL vampire movie, was released a century ago. Ever since, audiences can't seem to quench their thirst for the supernatural beings. But with the big-screen tales of these bloodsuckers getting long in the tooth creatively, first-time director JJ Perry is taking a unique stab at the genre with *Day Shift*.

"The movies I loved when I was growing up were *Big Trouble In Little China*, *The Lost Boys*, the first *Fright Night* and all the *Evil Dead*," says Perry, who's making his directorial debut following stints as a second unit director and stunt coordinator. "Sam Raimi is a master. That spoke to me immediately. That type of movie is a horror-action-comedy. My movie is an action-comedy-horror. Now the order might have been changed a little bit, but those are the movies that spoke to me."

VALLEY OF THE VAMPS

Day Shift follows Bud Jablonski (Jamie Foxx), an apparently average Joe cleaning pools in the San Fernando Valley in order to provide a normal life for his eight-year-old daughter. Bud's *real* gig, however, is exterminating vampires and extracting their fangs for money.

But after he slays a bloodsucker with ties to a powerful real estate vamp, Bud and his loved ones find themselves targeted by the undead. Alongside Foxx, Snoop Dogg stars as Bud's mentor Big John Elliott, Dave Franco as union representative Seth, Natasha Liu Bordizzo as vampire familiar Heather, and Meagan Good as Bud's ex-wife Jocelyn. "Audrey [Karla Souza] is a vampire trying to gentrify the town for herself," Perry says. "She's buying up all the property. She's trying to make it safe for her people to come up top. She wants to take over again."

"If we talk about vampire movies, *Bram Stoker's Dracula* is the end all, be all. That's not the type of movie I was trying to make. At some point, I would like to delve into [pure] horror," he continues. "But because of my 32 years of experience in action, I needed to rely on my strengths – which I think they were paying me to do. What I wanted was to create a few different species of vampires. We have the Southern Vamp, the Eastern Vamp and the



Oliver Masucci as Klaus... he's not at all sinister.



Dave Franco as Seth and Jamie Foxx as Bud.



Seth and Bud discuss tactics before heading off.



JJ Perry demanding lunch money from the cast.



Big John Elliott (Snoop Dogg) and Seth talk terms.



“ I needed to rely on my strengths – which I think they were paying me to do ”

Spider Vamp, who moves weird. An Uber Vamp is the combination of all of them.”

John Wick director Chad Stahelski produced *Day Shift*. Given that pedigree and Perry’s skillset, viewers can expect plenty of adrenaline-fuelled stunt choreography. The balls-to-the-wall opening sequence, for example, finds Bud breaking and entering an apartment and facing off against an elderly female vampire that just won’t die. One fun moment found the action unfolding via a large mirror’s reflection – but since vampires don’t cast a reflection, all we see is her clothes battling Bud. Perry describes the action as “cheeky, fun violence” and notes that he wanted it to be “fast and furious, not slow and curious”.

“Having to make that all work in-camera, I didn’t have time to do really extensive vampire make-up,” Perry explains. “We focused on a few of the characters, but I relied more on the movement of the vampires, like using a contortionist and shooting in reverse. I kind of mixed breakdancing with Lucha libre [Mexican wrestling] and MMA. It became a nondescript style of fighting. Then, weaponise that. There’s a lot of reverse photography on all of the reactions.

“We also didn’t have to retrofit the action to set,” he adds. “We built the set to fit the action. I definitely wanted to do the mirror gag right away. There were originally bones in the walls – when she blasts Bud through the walls, a bunch of skulls and bones fell out. Everyone she ate, she put in there. We decided it might be a little too creepy and dark, so we took those bones out. In the end, we didn’t have a lot of time. We shot all those scenes very quickly. We had to be hyper-efficient.”

When it comes to sequels, Perry believes there’s still plenty of life left in *Day Shift*’s veins. The director has already mapped out Bud’s backstory as a sniper in the Gulf War, and his first encounter with vampires there. A follow-up might take the story somewhere else. “I already have it all in my head, but I can’t spill the beans,” he says. “Bud ended this movie with a pocketful of expensive teeth. Once you make a little money, you move to Hollywood.

“I would just say that part two would be set in Hollywood... and there are a lot more vampires there than in the Valley,” he concludes. “They’re everywhere!” **BC**

Day Shift is on Netflix from 12 August.



FABLES HAVE ALWAYS been part of director George Miller's life.

When he was a child in the 1950s, growing up in Queensland, he and his twin brother listened to a recorded version of Oscar Wilde's "The Happy Prince". "It was produced by Orson Welles. He narrated it. And it's wonderful. My brother and I, we didn't have DVDs or anything else – we played it a thousand times, over a year, two years."

So perhaps it's no surprise that the Australian filmmaker behind the *Mad Max* films should be so entranced by AS Byatt's novella *The Djinn In The Nightingale's Eye*. It's the story of an academic specialising in narratology who visits Turkey for a conference, buys a trinket and – after cleaning it – releases a wish-granting djinn that's been lurking inside this past 3,000 years. "It felt so rich and full of dramatic potential," he says.

Since buying the film rights from Byatt in the late '90s, he's spent the last two decades tinkering with the script, alongside daughter Augusta Gore – frequently waylaid by other movies. "I'm very slow!" he chuckles. Largely a two-hander, with more dialogue than 100mph action sequences, it was also a difficult sell. While he talked to Warner Bros, with whom he made 2015's *Mad Max: Fury Road*, he ultimately looked elsewhere for financing. "I knew it wasn't a studio film," he admits.

The resulting film, *Three Thousand Years Of Longing*, is finally here after premiering at the Cannes Film Festival, where its pre-screening red carpet was interrupted by a naked Ukrainian woman protesting against the Russian invasion. Miller took it all in his stride. "The unexpected makes it memorable," he reasons. "I'm not saying that slapping someone at the Oscars is necessarily a good thing. But someone doing this is great. The unusual is what stands out."

The same goes for the film, which required every ounce of Miller's filmmaking know-how, as the djinn's fantastical stories spirit audiences back to the Ottoman Empire. Casting Tilda Swinton as

Dr Alithea Binnie finds her djinn is just the tonic.



DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Turkish Delight

An Istanbul-set fable about a djinn and a lonely academic, **Three Thousand Years Of Longing** sees *Mad Max*'s George Miller realise his passion project

the academic, Dr Alithea Binnie, and Idris Elba as the djinn, he pulled the legendary cinematographer John Seale out of retirement (for a second time, following *Fury Road*) for a shoot that took place in Sydney at the height of Covid.

Though a roster of VFX houses helped him realise his vision, Miller was also keen to use old-school techniques (Elba frequently wore tall shoes, to differentiate his size from Swinton). "I feel very, very fortunate to have been around

long enough to make films which saw the transition – late '80s, early '90s – into the digital realm," he says. "The difference between now and 10 years ago when it comes to CG is remarkable. But that's a tool. That's not the essence of the story."



“If it sticks around, it’s for a reason, and you keep coming back to it”

The essence – aside from looking at love and loneliness – is otherness, with Alithea facing some parochial points of view from her neighbours when she returns to London later in the story. “That’s definitely in there,” Miller confirms. “I mean, you come to the modern world, and we see divisions. In all cultures, we see these divisions [and] unravelling cultures.” Internet communities, he sighs, foster “dysfunctional beliefs”.

Do advances in tech also mean we’re losing our ability to believe in the fantastical? “Not quite... all I’m saying is it’s always changing,” he notes. “And the thing that changes it most is the acquiring of new knowledge, shared public knowledge, that we get through science.” Even his grandfather, he thinks, would be bowled over by what a mobile phone can now do. “And that’s only one or two generations away. So that’s what’s changing.”

Miller calls the whole *Three Thousand Years* experience “refreshing”, coming between *Fury Road* and its prequel *Furiosa*, which he’s now shooting in Australia. With Anya Taylor-Joy taking on the titular character previously played by Charlize Theron, he’s excited to dip back into that world. “Because [*Fury Road*] happened over a short period of time, we had to pick it up on the run, as it were, almost speed-date. To get to understand her backstory... this is the 15 years that took her – and the world – to get to that point.”

The director is also delighted to get *Three Thousand Years* into the world, after more than 20 years thinking about it. “If it sticks around, it sticks around for a reason, and you keep coming back to it,” he acknowledges. “And I think that happens to all of us. There are stories that you’ve heard from your childhood, whether it’s something you’ve read or seen, that stick around with you for all that time.” His film will surely do to others what Byatt’s book did to him. **JM**

Three Thousand Years Of Longing is in cinemas from 2 September.



“What’s the worst that could happen?”

ACTOR EXCLUSIVE

Eye Sore

Boyd Holbrook bites back as **The Sandman's** adversary the Corinthian



BOYD HOLBROOK'S role in the new *Sandman* series promises plenty of bite. The actor portrays the Corinthian, an entity with an unnerving physical feature: instead of peepers, two rows of jagged teeth line his eye sockets, which he conceals with a pair of shades. Boyd was initially concerned about how that attribute would translate onto the small screen.

"Coming on-set the first day, I put the glasses on and I literally couldn't see," Holbrook tells Red Alert. "I had about 10% vision. I was stumbling around set. It took all my attention away. They call 'Action' and my mind just went blank. For the life of me, I could not remember what the scene was. It took about half an hour to get adjusted. Eventually, it was going underneath a veil and it almost became like wearing a mask."

Based on Neil Gaiman's comic books, the show follows the King of Dreams and one of the Endless, Morpheus (Tom Sturridge). As fans will know, Morpheus's other aliases include Sandman and Dream. Captured by humans and contained on Earth for 105 years, he finally escaped his mortal prison and set out to restore his kingdom to all its glory. Now his creation, the Corinthian – a nightmare unhappy with the boundaries separating the

“Coming on-set the first day, I put the glasses on and I literally couldn't see”



CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

To The Devil A Daughter

Puberty outs the Antichrist in FX's new animated comedy **Little Demon**

Dreaming and the waking world, who has developed a taste for the eyes of his victims – stands in his way. Holbrook channelled such fictional serial killers as Hannibal Lecter to give his predator a charismatic, but menacing, vibe.

"I had a very specific voice I used," Holbrook says. "We did expand on his clothing. He's been around for hundreds of years, so we elevated his style and sophistication. We wanted to make the Corinthian a character you would welcome into your home, rather than an abrasive person who would break into and enter your home."

So what is the Corinthian's endgame? Chaos and self-preservation sound about right. Knowing there's a clock ticking down before he must face Morpheus again, the Corinthian wants to "squeeze every drop of satisfaction out of life." That involves unleashing a dangerous convict, who has been locked up in solitary confinement, to run amok.

"Along the way, the Corinthian hopes that he can gather up enough resources and tools to defeat Dream and carry on in the free world," offers Holbrook. "His goal is to not go back into the Dreaming, to not go back and be a puppet for Dream."

JONESING FOR IT

Next up for Holbrook is *Indiana Jones 5*, a "phenomenal experience" that could be the Kentucky native's dream gig. Holbrook notes that, growing up, he and his sister were "fanatic, manic children" over *Temple Of Doom*. "It was amazing to get to work with Harrison Ford, who is an absolute monster actor, human being and person," Holbrook says. "I've worked with a lot of people and he is just a childhood hero. James Mangold is directing, who I've worked with before, and I think is the absolute best filmmaker out there."

"He's made a badass, fast, crazy, funny movie," he concludes. "It's proper cinema, going to the theatre. It's got everything, and I've just been totally invigorated by that experience." **BC**

The Sandman is on Netflix now.



WHAT IF A POWERFUL WICCAN hooked up with Satan and their union produced the Antichrist, in the form of a 13-year-old girl? That's basically the twisted premise behind FX's new animated comedy *Little Demon*, which has Aubrey Plaza and Danny DeVito voicing the diametrically opposed parents, and Lucy DeVito voicing their puberty-achieving hellspawn, Chrissy.

Created by comedy writers Darcy Fowler, Seth Kirschner and Kieran Valla, the story came out of them riffing around the idea of a young woman with a cursed womb giving birth to the Antichrist.

"Then we thought it would be really exciting if we just fast-forwarded this story," Valla tells Red Alert. "As we kept developing it together, we kept ageing her up and we found that 13 was a perfect age because it was so thematically rich in terms of territory to explore and that time period for a mother/daughter relationship too."

The series has Laura (Plaza) going on the run right after the birth of Chrissy, avoiding any kind of permanent set-up so that Satan (DeVito) can't find them. It's only when Chrissy gets her first period that her powers finally present; then there's nowhere else to hide, so hello dad!

Chrissy finds herself at a new school in Middletown, Delaware, livid with her mum and tempted by Satan trying to be her "cool dad." Fowler says the relationships are heightened but hopefully still very relatable for

viewers. "I think a lot of women can look back at their mother/daughter relationships, especially around that era, and there's so much horror connected with it," she laughs. "Everyone's at their worst. And this single mother, who's been on the run for so long, is also trying to acclimate to suburbia. There's a lot of horror there."

"We're also having fun with the idea of subverting, in our own way, the ethereal realm, as we call it," Fowler says of Satan's side of the story. "It encapsulates the universe's ideas of Heaven and Hell and the afterlife. There's a lot of ideas that we subvert; for instance, the metaphysical realm where Satan is currently, and not in Hell, which you'll learn more about. Basically, the metaphysical realm is the Port Authority of all of the Underground."

Kirschner says they were able to get Plaza onboard early as he's known her since they were kids in Delaware, and they all became friends doing comedy. "Aubrey, Danny and Lucy are all so ridiculously talented," he enthuses about their core cast.

"They have such good comedic sensibility, and they are all so smart too. They bring so much to the table, not just for their characters, but for the series as a whole. They want to go deeper than it just being surface-level. Rather than it just being a funny, goofy comedy, we want to find the heart. Luckily, they know exactly how to dive even deeper with that." **TB**

Little Demon is on FX now. UK details are TBC.



Not sure which of these situations is worse.



SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

Dead Or Alive

The undead get the anthology treatment in **Tales Of The Walking Dead**



OVER THE COURSE OF 12 YEARS, THE *WALKING DEAD* universe has given fans three separate series charting how small enclaves of humans around the United States have survived the post-apocalyptic aftermath of the Walker infestation. Now the franchise is trying something altogether new with its first anthology series, *Tales Of The Walking Dead*.

Created by Scott M Gimple and long-time franchise writer Channing Powell, the six-episode series isn't bound by existing, ongoing storylines or the fixed locations of each show. *Tales Of The Walking Dead* will consist of standalone stories that can take place anywhere within the fall of society.

"I don't honestly know why we didn't do it earlier, because I've loved this idea from the beginning," Powell enthuses to Red Alert about the anthology format. "Because I've been in *The Walking Dead* world for so

long, it was particularly exciting for me, just as a writer, to sit down with the show and think, 'What have we not seen in *The Walking Dead*? What sort of totally new stories can we tell? How far can I push the boundaries of this universe? And how much will Scott let me get away with because I have been working with him for so long?'" she laughs. "It was interesting to see that I would set a boundary and he would fiddle with it a little bit. And we ended

up moving it to a place where we're both comfortable."

Powell promises a series that will appeal to the diehard fans of the franchise and also those who just like genre storytelling and might not know anything about the ongoing mythology. "We tried to do a balance of three really outside-the-box episodes versus three episodes that felt a little bit more within the tone of the universe," Powell teases of the first season's tonal mix. "We left the

Look at him casually showing off that watch.



Brooklyn Nine-Nine's Terry Crews as Joe.

door open in a couple of those episodes to potentially revisit later, but also had to craft it in a way that, if that's the end of the story, that's the end of the story and it still feels satisfying."

She says that attentive viewers who know the flagship *Walking Dead* show will see some connections. "But there are other episodes that are entirely different, set in a different part of the US with different characters that have nothing at all to do with any of the other shows." One of the episodes which should delight diehard fans fleshes out the

backstory of the Whisperers' former leader, Alpha (Samantha Morton).

Alpha's arc ended at the end of season 10, and Powell says this anthology episode was born from her love of the character's villainy. "I just always wanted to find out how she became Alpha. We had a little inkling of who she was right at the

"There are a couple of episodes that are totally outside of the box"

start of the apocalypse, in the basement with her husband and [daughter] Lydia. But what happened in-between?"

The episode incorporates some of the backstory that Morton developed for her character, and Powell says that they wrote it and then sent it to her for review. "We wanted to surprise her with some new elements, and I think we did," Powell shares.

"She was like, 'I had never thought of it that way, but that's really fascinating.' And she was totally lovely, and so excited to come back. She said she has a particularly soft spot for this character, which I think everybody does because she's so unique and interesting."

As for the other five stories, Powell doesn't want to ruin the surprises, but expect to see the

unexpected – like *The Walking Dead*'s riff on the classic film *Harold And Maude*. "I tend to like dark humour, and I always wanted to tell a story in that vein and wanted to see what somebody like Parker Posey would be like in this world, which is totally outside the box of, I think, what *Walking Dead* fans are expecting."

If audiences show up and respond well to this first season, Powell says it's her greatest hope that *Tales Of The Walking Dead* gets picked up for another one, because they're already ready with more stories. "We had this vast menu of episodes we could tell, and we had to narrow it down to six," she says.

"There are a couple in there that are totally outside of the box, and I would love to tell them, but I don't think we could have gone that far in season one. But should we get a season two, there are a couple of episodes on the back-burner that I'm really hoping we get to tell." **TB**

Tales Of The Walking Dead is on AMC from 14 August. UK details are TBC.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Worlds Wide Web

With anniversary special **Amazing Fantasy** #1000 and *The Edge Of Spider-Verse*, it's a banner month for Spidey



SET TO CELEBRATE HIS 60TH anniversary this month with the landmark *Amazing Fantasy* #1000, Peter Parker is also returning to the wider Spider-Man multidimensional world in the upcoming *The End Of Spider-Verse*, written by long-time Spidey scribe Dan Slott.

"It feels like I'm home!" announces Slott, who will also be teaming up with Mark Bagley on a brand-new *Spider-Man* monthly in October. "Writing *Spider-Man* is my dream gig, as Spider-Man is my favourite ever fictional character."

The final part of a trilogy that also encompasses 2014's original *Spider-Verse* and 2018's *Spider-Geddon*, *The End Of Spider-Verse* will serve as an appetiser for next year's big-screen animated film *Across The Spider-Verse*. "Now they've got a new movie coming out, we're going to do *The End Of Spider-Verse* and wrap it all up," laughs Slott.

"If the last series was *The Empire Strikes Back*, this is *Return Of The Jedi*! 'Boom, blow it all up!' This is the last Spider-Verse story and I've always known what the premise of it would be. I'm not going to spoil it for you but it's a good hook, so hopefully there's stuff you won't see coming."

First up, however, is the four-issue spin-off *The Edge Of Spider-Verse*. Described by Slott as "a big fun anthology where different writers and artists get to make up brand-new Spideys," it reacquaints us with some familiar alternate wall-crawlers and introduces some totally new web-spinners. "It's fun seeing other creators do their schtick on Spider-Man," continues Slott. "Over the course of this series, you'll see which guys get to join Peter and Miles Morales on the team for *The End of Spider-Verse*."





Spider-Man, Spider-Man 2 and Spider-Man 3. Phew.

Along with an all-new Spider-Man who is “a whole new character from a completely different part of the country” to the now-deceased original Spider-Man, Slott and artist Martin Coccolo have also created the “kilt-wearing, bushy-bearded Scot” Spider-Laird. “As someone who loves Jamie McCrimmon from *Doctor Who*, it’s good to get that out of my system,” says Slott. “Spider-Laird comes from a different Earth and time period, and he’s not a Peter Parker, so it will surprise people who he really is.”

“We’re also bringing back Anya as Spider-Girl and evolving her character and looking at everything in her past, which all builds to something new where she can play a unique role in *The End of Spider-Verse*. We’re also going to meet Spider-Rex, who is our first Spider-Man who is a Tyrannosaurus rex, and there’s Hunter-Spider, which is Kraven the Hunter as Spider-Man.”

“And Irene Sankoff and David Hein, the creators of Broadway’s *Come Away With Me*, are doing Spinstress, the first singing/talks-to-animals Spider-Princess, which makes me so happy as there will be music!”

FULL CIRCLE

Proclaimed by *Spider-Man* editor Nick Lowe as “the last Spider-Man story that will ever be told,” Slott and artist Jimmy Cheung’s 12-pager for *Amazing Fantasy* #1000, meanwhile, centres on Peter and Mary-Jane’s enduring love. “It’s my best shot at writing a bookend to Spider-Man’s debut in *Amazing Fantasy* #15,” he says. “If someone asked me to go all the way to *Amazing Fantasy* #1000 and write something on the completely opposite end of the spectrum, this would be that story.”

Lowe says that he “just wanted to put together a set of awesome stories and a mix of classic, modern and out of the box creators.” The 72-page special’s impressive roster includes Neil Gaiman and Armando Iannucci. “Neil pulled a real Neil Gaiman and delivered an emotionally deep and challenging tale that will charm your pants off,” reveals Lowe, who paired him with artist Steve McNiven.

“I’ve been chasing Armando Iannucci for years to write a single line of J Jonah Jameson dialogue, and he’s done that and so much more. Armando’s story needed someone with a proven track record for outdoing *Watchmen*, so Ryan Stegman was my only option.”

Illustrated by Terry Dodson, Kurt Busiek’s contribution provides a pay-off for one of *Amazing Fantasy* #15’s other two stories, “The Man In The Mummy Case”, which was the handiwork of Stan Lee and Steve Ditko.

“Nick told me that it was a celebration not just of Spider-Man, but of *Amazing Fantasy* itself, including the quirky fantasy stories that ran in the back of the book,” explains Busiek. “Nick said I could do a Spider-Man story, or do one of those fantasy stories, but me being me, my immediate question was ‘Can I do both at once?’ It’s long been one of my ambitions to do a sequel to the back-ups in *Amazing Fantasy* #15, figuring ways to tie them into the Marvel Universe and getting Spidey involved, and finally I’ve had the chance to do that.” **SJ**

Edge Of Spider-Verse #1 is out now. *Amazing Fantasy* #1000 is out 31 August.

“It’s fun seeing other creators do their schtick on Spider-Man”



WRITER EXCLUSIVE

The Aim Of The Rose

Rochelle (Isis Hainsworth), not having much fun.

The Clarkson twins on **Red Rose**, their new social media-obsessed horror series

WE ALL KNOW THAT SMARTPHONES ARE THE BANE OF a teenager's life and that certain apps are, well, not exactly good for us, but what if there was an application which really was dangerous, and exposed its users to an evil supernatural entity?

That's the mouthwatering concept behind *Red Rose*, a new eight-part series due to air on BBC Three and iPlayer in the UK and on Netflix worldwide. Created by twins Michael and Paul Clarkson (*The Haunting Of Bly Manor*, *See*, *The Wheel Of Time*), it was actually during a meeting for soap opera *Hollyoaks* in which they were asked if they had any ideas for a TV show.

"We said yeah, we've got this horror – it's like *Scream* and *The Ring* set in Bolton, which is our hometown," says Michael. "We always knew that we wanted to do something set in Bolton, because growing up in the '90s, when we were watching horror films, we always wondered what it would be like if that was set in a working class northern town."

The series' Lancashire location is its greatest USP. It's rare to see a fantasy series this grounded in reality. Like a supernatural *Happy Valley* or a fantasy-tinged *Shane Meadows* show, it's the realism of its characters and locations that give its horror such power.

"What we tried to depict, we were like 'absolutely no poverty porn,'" says Michael. "Sometimes you watch stuff that just makes you feel depressed about that kind of social background, but we never felt depressed about our social background – we just got on with it."

So what kind of fictions fed into *Red Rose*? What series or films or books were part of the twins' "mood board" for the show? "We always refer to this show

as *Scream* meets *The Ring* meets *Derry Girls*," laughs Paul. "There's also a few *Star Wars* moments that have crept into this and also *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*."

In the series, the Red Rose app encourages its users to take on increasingly dangerous challenges. Did the show come out of the twins' fear of our addiction to social media?

"It's a tool," says Paul. "But I personally think right now it has been worse than it has been good."

"There are a lot of good elements to social media," adds Michael. "When I see representation of LGBTQ+, I personally feel a lot more connected to a world than when I was younger. It can either be a weapon, or it can be a healing device," he continues.

"What we really wanted to say with *Red Rose* is the more aware you are of it being a tool that can be used in either way, you can take power back, for your own mental health. So we're hoping that *Red Rose* highlights to anyone watching that, yeah, it's good, and yeah, it's bad, but you need to be in control of your world and know what you need to know in order to navigate it."

Both say that although the series is self-contained, there is, they hint, scope for a follow-up. "As writers," says Paul, "we always felt frustrated watching shows that would quite obviously keep it open to get a second

series, which for us doesn't ring well.

"A series deserves to have its full story and full timeline with a filmic option. So yes, it's self-contained, but there's an option for a second series to be done." **so**

Red Rose is on BBC Three and iPlayer later this summer.



The rest of the gang, also not having much fun.

NEW AUTHOR

STACEY MCEWAN

MEET THE TEACHER BEHIND FANTASY NOVEL *THE LEDGE*



Tell us about your protagonist.

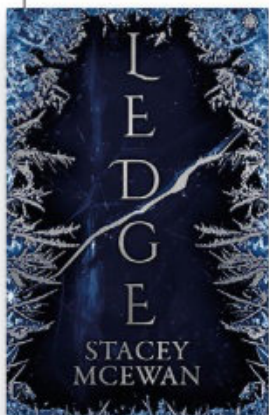
→ Dawsyn Sabar is a young woman living as a prisoner on the Ledge – an icy mountain shelf. She's long since lost the members of her family, and goes to extraordinary lengths to stay alive in a place where the hostilities do not end with blizzards and frostbite.

How long did the book take to write?

→ I wrote the first draft in five months, but editing is always a long process. It had a few evolving facets, but none so much as the central relationship, which I'd originally imagined to be a "perfect match", and became something complex and challenging.

Did you have to do much research?

→ There was a fair amount into boring things like timber species, cold climate flora and so on. Australia doesn't allow for much experience in cold weather, so there was almost nothing about tundra biomes that I already knew.



Which authors do you admire?

→ Tomi Adeyemi, Madeline Miller, Stephen Aryan and Danielle Jensen

come to mind. I think the best authors are the ones who've managed to forcefully carve a corner room in your brain. For me, that's often through quality characters.

Any advice for budding authors?

→ Read! As much as you can, especially in the genre you wish to write in. Osmosis is a wonderfully powerful thing. Make your writing time sacred. **IB**

Ledge is out on 13 September, published by Angry Robot.

THE FINAL FRONTIER



GREG JEIN 1945-2022

Remembering the *Star Trek* and *Close Encounters* model maker

Once praised by Steven Spielberg as "the greatest miniature guy in the world", model maker and designer Greg Jein helped create some of screen science fiction's most immortal images.

Born in Los Angeles, the Chinese American was a lifelong genre lover who collected comic books and pulp magazines and, as an early fan of *Star Trek*, built replica props for his own amusement. A professional break came in 1974 with raunchy SF spoof *Flesh Gordon*, along with a credit on John Carpenter's debut *Dark Star*. TV movie *The UFO Incident* and an episode of *Wonder Woman* followed in 1975.

Recruited by Doug Trumbull, Jein served as chief model maker on *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*, sculpting a detailed miniature of Devils Tower from a block of foam. This model was combined with a background matte and live-action footage for the film's climactic scene of first contact.

Jein and his team also built the majestic mothership, working from a design by Ralph McQuarrie. Standing 97cm tall and 160cm in diameter, the finished model weighed 181kg and needed four or five people to lift it. Jein's work on *Close Encounters* earned him an Oscar nomination for Best Visual Effects, as did his next collaboration with Spielberg, *1941*.

Star Trek: The Motion Picture saw Jein teaming with Trumbull again, working on the sequence where Spock space-walks inside cosmic entity V'Ger. Many other *Trek* credits followed: the Enterprise D and the Klingon Vor'cha-class attack cruiser in *The Next Generation*, the Excelsior in *Voyager* episode "Flashback", and some particularly nostalgic – and Emmy-nominated – modelwork in *Deep Space Nine*'s "Trials And Tribble-ations". "My childhood dream was building the Enterprise and the K-7 space station and the Klingon ship," said Jein, who went on to have credits on such genre blockbusters as *Avatar* and *Interstellar*. **NS**



The mothership rises over Devils Tower.

JAMES CAAN 1940-2022

Renowned American actor with genre credits on *Rollerball*, *Alien Nation* and *Misery*.

MONTY NORMAN 1928-2022

British film composer credited with writing the James Bond theme for *Dr No*.

ALAMY

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ANDOR



ROGUE ONE HERO
CASSIAN ANDOR IS
BACK! SHOWRUNNER
TONY GILROY, AND
STARS DIEGO LUNA AND
GENEVIEVE O'REILLY,
TELL *SFX* ABOUT THE
BOURNE-INSPIRED
PREQUEL SERIES THAT'S
"MAKING IT REAL"

WORDS: **RICHARD EDWARDS**

REBELS
WITH A
CAUSE



GETTY, ISTOCK





Cassian Andor (Diego Luna): a boy in the hood.

CASSIAN ANDOR IS dead. Even by the standards of *Rogue One* – aka the *Star Wars* movie where *everybody* dies – the Rebel Alliance operative's demise by Death Star was pretty definitive. If he was a parrot, he'd be bereft of life, pushing up daisies and joining the choir invisible – an ex-Rebel. But as *Obi-Wan Kenobi* proved earlier this year, being canonically dead is no barrier to having your own TV show.

"We're not bringing him back from the dead, not at all," laughs Diego Luna, who reprises his *Rogue One* role in new Disney+ prequel series *Andor*. "He sacrificed everything for the cause and that hasn't changed, but I think what is beautiful is to say, 'Okay, now that you care about him, now that you know what he's capable of, we're going to tell you where things started and how difficult that journey was.' I think it's an interesting approach and a really cool way to start an idea. Normally we work

the other way around, but it's kind of nice to not be worrying about how to surprise people at the end. Instead, let's create an interesting journey of someone who has an awakening so profound that it makes him willing to sacrifice everything. But what gets him there?"

The man charged with giving Cassian a credible history is Tony Gilroy, the *Michael Clayton* director and *Bourne* franchise screenwriter who famously oversaw the extensive *Rogue One* reshoots that are now widely credited with saving the movie. As showrunner on *Andor*, Gilroy has crafted a

backstory in which Cassian's homeworld was destroyed during his childhood. Now – some five years before the fateful mission of *Rogue One* – the adopted planet he calls home is about to be crushed under the metaphorical iron boot of the Galactic Empire. And frankly there wouldn't be much of a show if *Andor* simply stood by and let it happen.

"We're going to tell Cassian's whole origin story, from his childhood to his adopted home and through," explains Gilroy. "My pitch to Kathy [Kennedy, Lucasfilm president] and Diego was that he's got to start as far away



Corners are often the Empire's ultimate foe.



Genevieve O'Reilly returns as Mon Mothma.



Mothma meets Luthen Rael (Stellan Skarsgård).

Looks like Syril Karn (Kyle Soller) is in trouble.



[from the character he becomes in *Rogue One*] as he can possibly be. I mean, to have the various attributes he has – to be empathetic and to be conscious to the point where you would give yourself for the galaxy, where you can be seductive, and you can lie, where we see him follow orders and go against orders... It's like, 'How do you get to that point?' I wanted to make that journey as difficult as possible, so that you couldn't imagine the guy five years earlier is going to be the guy in *Rogue*."

"We meet Cassian in a very selfish moment of his life," adds Luna. "This is basically a guy who doesn't know he's capable of what he will do later. I don't think everyone would be willing to sacrifice everything for a cause – most people would be like, 'I might help as much as I can but I don't know if I will go that far.' So right now we have the chance to tell you why Cassian is that person, why he is the one who says yes all the way."

Of course, even the hero we met in *Rogue One* didn't always hang out on the side of the

“We’re going to tell Cassian’s origin story, from his childhood to his adopted home”

angels. In a memorable moment early in the film, he executes Rebel spy Tivik (played by Danny Mays) to stop him sharing crucial information about the nascent Rebellion. “If Tivik lives, or gets caught, then they wouldn't have been able to destroy the Death Star,” says Gilroy. “So you tell me, is it a good decision? It's not just a difficult decision, it's heartbreaking,

but it's the kind of decision that he's probably had to make a lot of.”

Indeed, the world *Andor* inhabits in the new show seems set to be one filled with shades of grey morality, where actions that might otherwise have been considered dubious are deemed essential for the greater good.

“There are a few hints about his backstory in *Rogue One*,” says Luna. “There's a moment where he says he's been fighting since he was six years old. And there's another line where he tells Jyn Erso that he has done terrible things for the Rebellion, and that he has no attachments but to the Rebellion, the cause and the idea. I think it's interesting to ask what →



"Now where did I park the landspeeder again?"



Mon Mothma throws a little soirée. Hey, why not?

needed to happen to this man to be there. That's why I think this series is so rich, because it is a long journey to get there."

Running at 12 episodes, *Andor's* first season is significantly longer than Disney+/Star Wars stablemates *The Mandalorian*, *The Book Of Boba Fett* and *Obi-Wan Kenobi*. It will follow a year in Andor's life – mostly set on a single planet – before the already commissioned second season covers the four years leading into *Rogue One*.

"It's always about character first for me, but this environment is really fascinating," says Gilroy. "I get this five-year period to deal with, and it's a pretty kinetic moment in history, with the Empire taking over. But you also have these spores of revolution all over the galaxy. Nobody knows each other, there's different factions, and it's all going to coalesce awkwardly and clumsily at Yavin."

"But how do all those people get together? I'm a drive-by historian and like most screenwriters, I spend a lot of time learning a lot of stuff that you then know a little bit about. Independent of this show, I spent a lot of time reading about revolutions, and I've always been fascinated by them."

MOTHMA TO A FLAME

One thing that *Andor* makes abundantly clear is that there's no single way to spark the fires of revolution. While Cassian himself is getting his hands dirty on the front lines, others are attempting to use more diplomatic channels to facilitate change. And one of the prime movers on this political stage will be rather familiar to *Star Wars* fans: step forward the long-standing senator for Chandrila, Mon Mothma.

"At a certain point in the show, Diego's asking why [a particular] person is involved, and another character says, 'Well, everybody has their own rebellion,'" Gilroy points out.

OFFICER CLASS

Denise Gough plays Dedra

What was it like walking onto the *Andor* set?

♦ My first day on set, I walk on to this world that they've built, there's aliens walking around, and I was given two Death Troopers. There were loads of extras and I thought, "Okay, this is really fucking cool." When I walked along with these two Death Troopers, I kept going: [sings Imperial march]. And when I started all the extras joined in. It was very, very cool.

What can you tell us about your character?

♦ Well, she's an Imperial officer and her name is Dedra, which is the coolest name. The funniest thing about it is that one of the SAS guys who were helping the Death Troopers look really scary thought my name was Deidra, because I'm Irish. He kept saying to all the extras, "When Deidra comes in, you've just got to really respect Deidra because she's your boss." I wasn't going to say anything – I love that Dedra has become Irish Deidra in *Star Wars*.

Does Dedra believe in the Empire or is it just a job for her?

♦ Oh no, she doesn't think it's just a

job. She's proper Empire and she's so smart. When others miss things, she doesn't miss a thing. And it was great to not be creating a character where I have to go, "...and then everybody liked me because I've had a really hard time." She's like, "Get out of my way! Get me into the middle of everything with my Death Troopers!"

How did you deal with speaking the language of a galaxy far, far away?

♦ I'm really good at learning lines, I have this kind of weird photographic memory thing, so I'd never had an issue until I started learning space dialogue. I went on set thinking I was really prepared, and then you go into the room, there's two people dressed as droids, and I couldn't do it. Ben [Caron, director] said we could fix it in the edit, so we cobbled it together, but I was mortified.

I went home and I rang Jodie Whittaker, and I rang Sebastian Stan, who's in *Marvel*, and I said to both of them, "How the fuck do you do this stuff?" Anyway, they helped me and I got so good at it that Ben told me I was able to do it so fast that the boom microphone couldn't keep up when they watched it on the monitor!



Denise Gough as Supervisor Dedra Meero: badass.

“Independent of this show, I spent a lot of time reading about revolutions”

"Our goal is to have as many varieties as you possibly can, and Mon Mothma has her own rebellion. People will find out a lot more about that as the show goes on, because there's some really interesting things that we're going to say about her."

"It's not that we're reversing canon or anything, we're just going to tell you that, wow, you had no idea what some people were really about – and maybe you don't understand why she's doing it all."

Mothma's involvement in the story means a return to that famous galaxy far, far away for Genevieve O'Reilly. The actor – who bears an uncanny physical resemblance to *Return Of The Jedi's* OG Mothma, Caroline Blakiston – first played the future leader of the Rebel Alliance in scenes that were ultimately deleted from 2005's *Revenge Of The Sith*. She's since reprised the role in both *Rogue One* and animated series *Star Wars Rebels*.

"It feels really special to return to a character at different parts of my life," O'Reilly tells *SFX*. "I love that Tony Gilroy was interested in investing time and story in this woman, and who she is and what her life was, what she was passionate about, and what her part in the formation of the Rebellion was – or is."



Bix Caleen
(Adria Arjona)
does some
Lara Crofting.

As ever in *Star Wars*, different points of view are pivotal to *Andor*, and the show will explore Cassian and Ms Mothma's stories in parallel. "I think one thing *Star Wars* can do really well is to allow for these worlds of experience to be light years apart," she says. "For Cassian Andor, this is the story about how he becomes this vital piece of the Rebellion. And then, over here on [Coruscant], you have Mon Mothma trying to affect change diplomatically.

"I think it can be really compelling to see people doing what they can within their own sphere of influence, fighting for the same things, and yet they're so far apart that nobody knows if anyone else is paying attention."

We'll also get to learn a little more about a character who – at present – is best known for her concern for the welfare of Bothan spies. "When we meet Mon Mothma in Coruscant, it's a high society world of intrigue and political machinations," O'Reilly explains. "She is trying to be a voice for diplomacy and a voice for action, and trying to gather allies against this ever looming autocracy.

"At the moment, the Emperor has all the numbers, and she is a very lonely voice. In order to change, she has to put her head above the parapet, which is highly dangerous, and I think that's what allows for the thriller element that runs through this season."

And that's where Gilroy's expertise comes in. While – unlike the all-knowing *Mandalorian*/*Book Of Boba Fett*/*Ahsoka* brains' trust of Jon Favreau and Dave Filoni – the writer admits he's "not a fan fan" of *Star Wars*, he certainly knows a thing or two about telling a down-and-dirty espionage tale. In fact, the Jason Bourne saga he scripted is widely credited with influencing the less bombastic approach of the Daniel Craig Bond movies, and it looks like we'll be seeing similarities in his take on *Star Wars*.

"[With *Bourne*] I had been trying to get people to make an acoustic action movie, because action movies had gotten so bombastic in the '80s, they were just enormous," Gilroy recalls. "So when *Bourne* came along, we went way down to nothing.

"It was about making it real. Keeping someone you really understand and really care about in a place that you understand the geography of, with stakes, is much more involving than a guy on a train with 15 machine guns and a helicopter coming down. That aesthetic, that idea, does carry over to *Andor* ➔

Killing Eve's
Fiona Shaw as
new character
Maarva.





Syril Karn and chums pay a visit to Maarva.

because we are on the ground with these people, so that everything that we do has an intimacy and an acoustic nature to it *within* the grandeur of *Star Wars*.”

It’s currently unclear whether that means we’ll see Cassian Andor taking down a Stormtrooper with a magazine or a pen, but Gilroy does assure us there’s fun to be found among the grit.

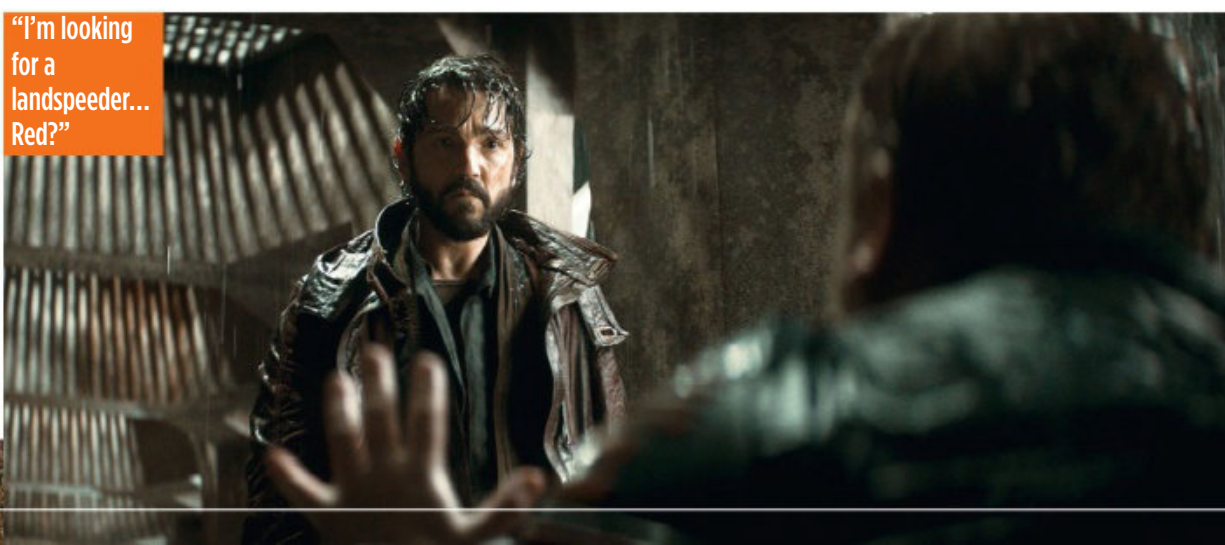
“It’s an adventure story,” he says. “It’s one man’s odyssey through the centre [of the story] and then all these peripheral characters surrounding him and spinning around. I mean, god, it’s looking to be entertaining. It’s heavy material, heavy things are happening, but it’s an adventure story, too.”

Like every *Star Wars* project set during the increasingly busy time period between *Revenge Of The Sith* and *A New Hope*, *Andor* finds itself caught in a canon sandwich on both sides. While Gilroy says he embraces the fact that everybody knows where Cassian’s story ends – “limitations like that are liberating” – he does find himself operating in exactly the same time

“No, it’s not here. Maybe I left it on Level four instead.”



“I’m looking for a landspeeder... Red?”



NICE ONE, SYRIL

Kyle Soller plays Syril Karn

What can you tell us about Syril Karn?

◆ Syril's kind of a lone wolf, and he has an intense desire for order, for standards to be upheld, and to transcend his own station – he thinks he's destined for great things. He's incredibly intuitive, very smart, very driven, very hungry, but his drive comes from a place of shame, and that shame and frustration and lonerism have turned into anger, and an obsession to dominate. That obsession then finds Cassian and I think Syril knows that Cassian is different – special. The fixation that Syril has with Cassian is almost possessive. There's a quality about this character who doesn't live by the rules, who is mysterious and who is incredibly adept at surviving, and Syril wants a bit of that. He just doesn't know why.

Syril's uniform doesn't look familiar. Who does he work for?

◆ It's kind of like the corporate police on Coruscant. He has his eyes on the end goal, which is becoming part of kind of the *Star Wars* version of the secret police, the ISB [Imperial Security Bureau].

Could you sense Tony Gilroy's past experience with Jason Bourne when you read the script?

◆ I think *Andor* goes somewhere that *Star Wars* hasn't really gone before,

and that is into spy thriller/espionage territory. It also gives you all the things that you expect from *Star Wars*, and then you have these incredibly domestic personal stories happening underneath as well. That's Tony's genius – he's such a well-versed writer and director, and his back catalogue's amazing. Plus, who wouldn't want to see a mash-up of *Star Wars* and *Bourne*?

From what we've seen in the trailer, the sets look incredible. Did you feel like you were living in a galaxy far, far away?

◆ I think one of the positives to come out of the pandemic situation was that we were originally supposed to go away to other countries to film, but then massively talented, creative people were forced to problem-solve and come up with a solution. That meant building these incredible sets and literally building towns. The scale and attention to detail was just something I'd never ever come across before, and your jaw drops a little bit when you walk onto them – it was pretty inspiring to be around.

Syril's already been immortalised as a Lego Minifigure. Career highlight?

◆ I couldn't believe it. I was such a *Star Wars* fan growing up, I was such a Lego fan growing up... so I might quit!



Syril's got his eye on Andor – and a promotion.

period as *Star Wars Rebels*, which also charted the early days of the Alliance to Restore the Republic. If that's a potentially daunting prospect, however, Gilroy certainly isn't showing it.

“Within *Star Wars*, within Wookieepedia, there's got to be four or five levels of canon,” Gilroy points out. “There's film canon, cartoon canon, fan-fiction canon and all these different things – and for the larger issues we deal with [*Star Wars* Lore Advisor – yes, that's his official job title!] Pablo Hidalgo.

“But our show is about ordinary people. They're behind the scenes, they're going to build the road to the revolution. We're really in

the kitchen with these people – our people are back there washing dishes, so canon might be happening off stage, but what's happening for them is something completely different. Every day our aspiration in every department, on every costume, every weapon and every sideburn is always how to make it real. That's the overriding manifesto for our show – make it real.”

Continuing that ethos, *Andor* hasn't been filmed on the virtual ‘Volume’ sets that routinely transport Mando, Boba Fett and Obi-Wan to other worlds on a weekly basis. Instead, *Andor*'s London-based production was more traditionally analogue, with big physical

sets and old-school location shoots; just as Canary Wharf tube station filled in for an Imperial base in *Rogue One*, the Cruachan dam in Scotland will play a prominent role in the new show.

“Covid really cut down our travel schedule!” Gilroy laughs. “We're hoping we'll go a little wider for [season] two!”

“We brought in Luke Hull,” he continues, “who's a wunderkind young production designer. He did *Chernobyl* and that should tell you where we're at [with the design]. Everything around you is so real.

“The switches and dials are all so funky and great, and George Lucas baked that in from the start. We're taking that funk and baking it into every department, to every part of the storytelling. We make the most of everything that we have, and we're trying to have a little more next time.”

“It's heavy material, heavy things are happening, but it's an adventure story, too”

Those giant sets would feel empty without a cast, and luckily *Andor* doesn't skimp on that side of the equation. Alongside Luna and O'Reilly, lead roles are taken by *Killing Eve*'s Fiona Shaw, *Chernobyl*'s Stellan Skarsgård, *Good Omens*' Adria Arjona, *Poldark*'s Kyle Soller and *The Kid Who Would Be King*'s Denise Gough, while the production employed (literally) thousands of extras.

“You can fit a dozen *Michael Claytons* inside this!” Gilroy says of his epic show. “We're dealing with, I don't know, 190 speaking parts in the first 12 episodes, and you're carrying over 25-30 characters that we care about from the first half to the second half. The first three episodes are pretty contained in our show, it's pretty much about this one place and this one couple of days. And then, when episode four starts, we just start adding characters and the world just gets really, really wide.”

And with not a word of understatement he adds: “There's a lot of things to talk about going on at this period of time.” ●

Andor is on Disney+ from 31 August. You can read more from Diego Luna and Genevieve O'Reilly in the next issue of SFX.

BLOND

TWO HUNDRED YEARS
BEFORE GAME OF THRONES,
THE DRAGON-RIDING
TARGARYEN DYNASTY WENT
TO WAR FOR THE IRON
THRONE. SHOWRUNNER
RYAN CONDAL REVEALS
HOW NEW PREQUEL SERIES

House Of The Dragon

IS BRINGING SUCCESSION
TO WESTEROS

WORDS: RICHARD EDWARDS





AMBITION

IF *GAME OF THRONES* TAUGHT US anything, it's that finding a successor to the king is a big deal – such a big deal, in fact, that an entire continent will happily go to war to get their preferred candidate on the throne. HBO faced a similar power vacuum when its smash hit fantasy series called it a day back in 2019, but thankfully the US cable giant's solution to the problem seems to involve rather less actual bloodshed, and a considerably larger budget.

Set around 200 years before the Lannisters, Starks, Baratheons, Greyjoys and Martells began their monumental tussle for the Iron Throne, prequel series *House Of The Dragon* is based on author George RR Martin's *Fire & Blood*. This “fake history” book – jokingly described by the Tolkien-loving Martin as the “GRRMarillion” – details the three centuries of the Targaryen dynasty in the run up to Martin's *A Song Of Ice And Fire* saga.

This being Westeros, you can guarantee that dysfunction and back-stabbing will be rife among the blond-haired, dragon-riding members of King's Landing's first family. In fact, we'll meet Daenerys's ancestors just before a Targaryen spat descends into an epic, continent-spanning civil war known as the Dance of the Dragons.

“*House Of The Dragon* was the show that George really wanted to do and that HBO was very much interested in,” co-showrunner Ryan Condal (*Colony*) tells *SFX*. “As you'll know if you've read *Fire & Blood* or the original books, there are a lot of fascinating stories to be told within the 300 years of the Targaryen dynasty. This is the one that George cared about the most because he felt like this story and the result of it have the greatest impact on *A Song Of Ice And Fire*. It's the story of the beginning of the decline of the Targaryen dynasty.” →

Why should we be excited about this period in Westeros's history?

✦ I think the Targaryens are set up really interestingly in the original series. They used to have dragons, great influence and power, but you meet them at a time where they're the least powerful that they've ever been in the history of their bloodline, and Daenerys is the sister of the Beggar King in Essos. The beautiful thing about what George wrote in *Fire & Blood* is that when you immerse yourself in the time period, you get a sense of what Daenerys was longing for – all the stories that she's heard about the greatness of the dynasty, the dozens of princes and princesses, the 17 dragons, and the 60 years of peace and prosperity.

This is all at the time of *House Of The Dragon*, after the reign of King Jaehaerys – the greatest king in Westeros history – has just come to an end, and Viserys, his successor, has begun his rule. Even though so many decades have passed between these events, it was really important that there was an emotional and thematic resonance to give this prequel a reason to exist. For me it's that tie back to Daenerys Targaryen.

Given the size of the time gap, how much do you look at this new show as a prequel? It's almost equivalent to making a spin-off from *The Crown* focused on King George III or Queen Victoria.

✦ That's a great idea! *The Crown* CU! George doesn't call *House Of The Dragon* a prequel, he calls it a successor show, which I've always really liked – I guess it's a predecessor show. But I think that's actually one of the things that makes it really interesting, because it's not just "Here's Ned Stark when he was a kid". It's not that kind of story, and I think that because

Emma Darcy and Matt Smith: Targaryens.



The Sea Snake with Princess Rhaenys Velaryon.

“George doesn't call *House Of The Dragon* a prequel, he calls it a successor show”

there's such a huge time gap between the shows, you really are relying on the thematic resonance between the two, and seeing how the dynamics of history change over time. Little drops in the stream here will have ripple effects that affect the characters that we've known and loved and followed for a decade on television.

***Fire & Blood* isn't a novel so much as George RR Martin's "record" of a certain period in Westeros's past. Did that bring unusual challenges to the adaptation?**

✦ It's certainly a very interesting adaptation challenge. I think the challenges are unique, because *Fire & Blood* is non-fiction, but it's



Paddy Considine plays King Viserys.



Rhaenyra Targaryen and Alicent Hightower.

fictional non-fiction – or fake history, as George calls it. There were times when I wished there was a little more detail about how you get from point A to point B, because one of the fun things about *Fire & Blood* is that George is playing with all the things that he loves about real history – there are huge gaps, unreliable narrators, and there are people writing history with an agenda. Plus, there's the fact that this is a story told by one Maester sifting through three different sources that all conflict.

The wonderful thing is that it gives you a ton of room for invention in the writing. As long as we were going from signpost to signpost – the events that we know happened because they were a matter of court record, such as Viserys being named as the heir to the throne at the Great Council – then we had an incredible amount of latitude to decide how the

characters were behaving in those in-between moments. There are lots of little things you don't know, like the palace intrigue that goes on in the king's private apartments – those little turns of fate that led to the big public events happening.

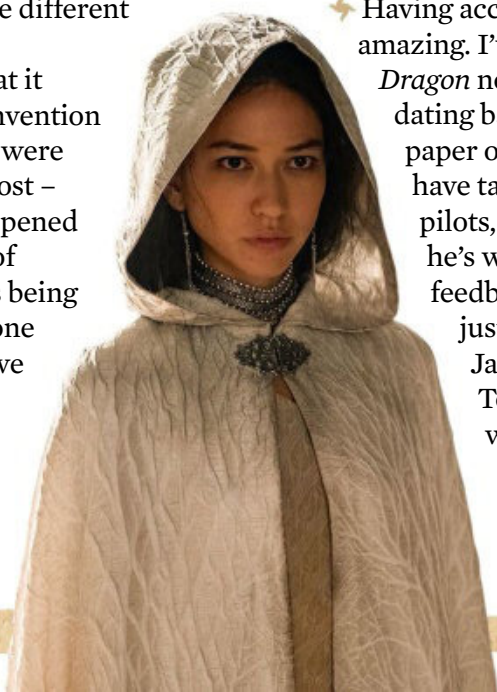
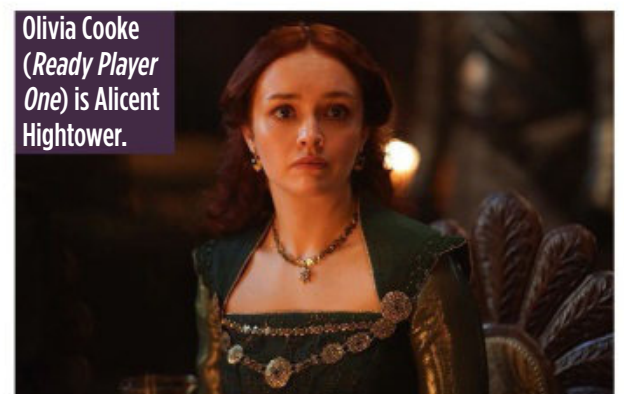
George RR Martin is a co-creator of the show. What's it been like working with the author who originated the universe?

★ Having access to him has been really amazing. I've been on *House Of The Dragon* now for nearly four years, dating back to when I first put pen to paper on the pilot, and George and I have talked about outlines and pilots, scripts and future arcs, and he's watched cuts and given feedback all the way through. He's just a great resource – if Peter Jackson could have had JRR Tolkien on speed dial while he was making *The Lord Of The*

Rings, I think he would have probably given him a call during that time. It's wonderful to have that kind of access, and George really does make himself available.

When you were creating this older version of Westeros, how much did you reference what had been done in *Game Of Thrones*? Obviously it's a different time period, but presumably it still needs to feel like the same world? →

Olivia Cooke (*Ready Player One*) is Alicent Hightower.



✦ That's one of the trickiest things that we had to contend with. This is a medieval world, which means time moves more slowly than it does in our time – if you went and dialled the clock back 200 years from today, the cities we're living in would look very, very different. But in this setting, things like castles have been standing for centuries or even millennia, and they don't change much – maybe they fall into greater disrepair over time, but the landscapes essentially look the same. And while the technology changes, it changes very slowly – the types of weapons that they use, how they use them and their armour, those things [are more constant].

The one big change that we made was fashion. Even in medieval times, if you look at the way a soldier dressed in 1100 versus 1300, there's a huge difference there. That's one of the things that we played with, but even when you do that, you're still paying homage to the design of the original show, because it has to look like it lives in the same universe.

Game Of Thrones featured a lot of families of similar stature, but the Targaryens are very much the headliners here. Should we be expecting *Succession* with dragons?

✦ Yeah, I think that's actually a great metaphor, and the things we referenced in the [writers'] room the most were *The Crown* and *Succession*, just as tonal analogues and as shows that we, the writers, were really enjoying and immersed in. The original *Game Of Thrones* is really the War of the Roses, so it's the Yorks and the Lancasters [played out] with the Starks and the Lannisters – two separate families that never liked each other in the first place going at it. This, however, is the Dance of the Dragons. It's a civil war that happens within a singular family, which in a way makes it much more engrossing and tragic, because you see people who are blood relatives turning against each other and going to war.

But this is a family squabble that affects an entire continent...

✦ Yeah, definitely. George had it right when he said in *A Feast For Crows* that, "When the nobles go to war, it's the small folk who suffer." In this case I think it's when the Targaryens go to war, *everybody* suffers.



Rhys Ifans schemes as Otto Hightower.



Fabian Frankel as Ser Criston Cole, a knight to remember.

The trailer suggests that King Viserys's decision to name his daughter Rhaenyra as his heir proves rather controversial in King's Landing. Is it a major theme in *House Of The Dragon*?

✦ Certainly, I would say the show is very much about the line from the trailer that says "Men would sooner put the realm to the torch than see a woman ascend the Iron Throne." This is the first time in history where a female has been named heir, and some people bend the

knee out of respect, while other people bend the knee because it's the king's word and they'll follow out of loyalty. But there's some people that just chafe against it entirely and believe that [the monarch] has to be a man, and women aren't suited to rule. The story very much explores the idea of what happens when a progressive king cuts against the grain and does something unexpected by naming his only daughter as the heir to the throne.

In *Game Of Thrones* the Targaryens don't have the best reputation. But surely they're not *all* bad...

✦ I've written a show about all just terrible people, so maybe it *is* *Succession*! [laughs] That's a great point, but it hits on one of the things that I think is most interesting about the way *Fire & Blood* is written, this idea that history is written with an agenda. The agenda of the Baratheons and the Lannisters, once they take power, is to run down the people that they replaced and say they were bad people,



Steve Toussaint is the Sea Snake: slippery.



Well, the Doctor certainly kept this quiet...

“I’ve written a show about all just terrible people, so maybe it is Succession”

that they were incestuous and in-bred, riven with madness and not suited to rule. But what you realise in this timeline is that it’s a family of individual humans with hopes and dreams and feelings. And yeah, some of them are pretty nasty and pretty crazy, but there are also really good ones with good hearts and nobility. I think you’ll see the full gamut of *Game Of Thrones* personalities in *House Of The Dragon* – with blond wigs on, of course.

Is this era of Westeros still a dangerous time to live in?

✦ I would say yes, Westeros is a very dangerous place. This is certainly a time of greater wealth and decadence, but I also think there’s a greater power distribution problem in this world because you have the aristocracy that sits above and crushes everybody beneath them. But then above them, you also have the

Targaryens and the people of Valyrian blood that crush down the nobility in a big way. So yes, it’s a very dangerous time with an entire bloodline of people that really answer to no one but their dragons.

Are dragons more taken for granted in the era of *House Of The Dragon*?

✦ I don’t think they’re taken for granted because they’re still a rather rare resource in this time. At the height of the dragon dynasty I think there were 17 adults – I’ve counted, believe me – which is a lot, but if you had a species on Earth where there were only 17 left, it would be so critically endangered that you wouldn’t even be able to look at them. They certainly exist and they’re ubiquitous in the sense that they’re ever-present because they’re so freaking huge. They fly over King’s Landing all the time, but they’re still very special, and they’re kind of revered as gods. They’re celebrities of this time, and actually more famous and adored than many of the Targaryens that ride them. ●

House Of The Dragon is on Sky Atlantic and NOW from 22 August.

Alicent and Otto Hightower get moody.



First Among Prequels

House Of The Dragon wasn’t the only *Game Of Thrones* spin-off in the works

When it came to finding a successor to *Game Of Thrones*, HBO didn’t put all its dragon eggs in one basket. Back in 2017, the network put five potential spin-off shows into development, and one of them – scripted by *X-Men: First Class* and *Kick-Ass* writer Jane Goldman (below) – even made it to the pilot stage. Set around 8,000 years before *Game Of Thrones*, it featured an all-star cast (including Naomi Watts, John Simm and Miranda Richardson), and would reportedly have depicted the legendary Long Night, when the First Men and the Children Of The Forest teamed up to take down the White Walkers. As it turned out, HBO decided not to go any further with the project – “Overall it did not quite gel,” said HBO chief content officer Casey Bloys – but they did greenlight *House Of The Dragon* direct to series, even though it hadn’t been part of the original quintet. “This one was late to the game in the ‘successor show’ process,” admits Condal. “When I got involved, *Fire & Blood* hadn’t been published yet. George had sort of developed it in secret and then he kind of dropped it on the world in surprise in late 2018. But this particular story was the thing that he wanted to do. There were things that HBO was interested in and there were things that George was interested in, and there were things that George was interested in that HBO wasn’t interested in. So I think it was just about finding those places of overlap. HBO was very interested in doing a Targaryen dynasty show, and George was very interested in this particular era. *House Of The Dragon* was the place where they both lined up and agreed.”



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THE LORD OF THE RINGS:
THE RINGS OF POWER

LOOK WHO'S TOLKIEN NOW

WITH **THE LORD OF THE RINGS:
THE RINGS OF POWER**, AMAZON IS TAKING
US BACK TO MIDDLE-EARTH. WE GET THE LOWDOWN
ON THE BIGGEST TV SHOW IN HISTORY

WORDS: **RICHARD EDWARDS**



ISTOCK/GETTY



C

HANCES ARE YOU'VE got a version of this story on your bookshelf, though you may not have read it. When *The Return Of The King*, the final instalment of JRR Tolkien's now-

legendary *The Lord Of The Rings* trilogy, was published in 1955, it came with extensive appendices. These colossal footnotes provided a crash-course in Middle-earth history to complement the story, and now they provide the inspiration for Amazon's mega-budget fantasy TV series *The Rings Of Power*.

"The appendix that comes after *The Lord Of The Rings* is basically like a historical chronicle," producer Belén Atienza tells *SFX*. "It's like reading a history book where a king here did this, or this is where the battle of that happened. We weren't really worried about people knowing the broad strokes of the story, because everyone knew the broad strokes of *The Lord Of the Rings* movies – and in this case people know even less!"

If you've struggled your way through *The Silmarillion*, you can now breathe a sigh of relief. While certain pivotal events in the appendices appeared in that distinctly

“Going to worlds that you haven't seen before really helped the show have its own identity”

non-page-turny history of early Middle-earth, *The Rings Of Power* isn't quite so hung up on Silmarils and creation myths.

Instead, the new show zeroes in on the Second Age of Middle-earth, millennia after Morgoth (Tolkien's answer to Satan) was banished to the Void, but around 3,000 years before Frodo Baggins left the Shire on a quest to dispose of some troublesome jewellery, and bring the Third Age to a close. Remember when Galadriel explained that "History became legend. Legend became myth," in the introduction to *The Fellowship Of The Ring*? We're about to see those legends and myths.

This is an era when the island kingdom of Númenor ruled the waves, when the Dwarf Lords still sat in their vast underground palace at Khazad-dûm (you know it as Moria), and Morgoth's former apprentice (we'll watch this Sauron's career with great interest) decided to craft One Ring to Rule Them All.

That, of course, can only spell bad news for the bearers of the 19 Rings bequeathed to the Elves, Dwarves and Men, and it's no spoiler to say that the *Rings Of Power* tagline is set to be very important indeed for the future of Middle-earth.

"The show should marry up to the Third Age stories," says producer Lindsey Weber, "and it should give you a deeper understanding of those stories if you know and love those. But this is also just a fantastic story on its own two legs. And even if you don't know anything, you will find yourself swept away, I think, in lots of different directions."

CONNECTING THE CONSTELLATIONS

Remember how much Gollum coveted his "Precious"? Even under the influence of the One Ring, the artist formerly known as Sméagol might have balked at the \$250 million Amazon reportedly paid for *The Lord Of The Rings*' TV rights. And with the show guaranteed to have movie-level production values, rumours abound that – by the time *The Rings Of Power*'s proposed five-season arc is done – it will cost in excess of a billion dollars.

All of which raises an intriguing question: how has the most expensive TV show in the history of TV shows ended up in the hands of a pair of young writers/showrunners – JD Payne and Patrick McKay – with no previous experience in television?

"The first time we sat down with them, we were very gladly surprised with everything that they said," says

JA Bayona, the *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* shot-caller who's serving as both an executive producer and a director on *The Rings Of Power*.

"They pitched us not only the first season, but the whole arc for the show. It felt very exciting, because it was a whole new story, taking the big important events in the Second Age, but creating something unique. They're very familiar with Tolkien's world and are very respectful, but at the same time, they're working on something totally new and original."

"They just had an incredible, instinctual idea about what it should be because they are such fans," explains Weber. "They talk about it as if Tolkien left the stars in the sky, and they just connected the constellations – it's all based in the source material, and they have just filled in the gaps."

When it comes to plugging holes in Tolkien's mythology, however, you could argue there's no such thing as "just". *Star Wars*, *Marvel* and *Star Trek* fans may think they have the



monopoly on sprawling continuities, but they've got nothing on *The Lord Of The Rings*, a fantasy world so vast – not to mention old – that academics have devoted entire careers to studying its ins and outs.

"The devil is in the details," Weber says, "and we want to be as true to the original material as we can be. We were blessed to work really closely with the Tolkien estate, and have all kinds of scholars and experts helping us because it's an incredible body of work that took decades to create. We wanted to make sure we were doing everything we could to stay close to it all."



Galadriel, aka Morfydd Clark, with Human chums.



Durin IV (Owain Arthur) takes notes.



Meanwhile, in the kingdom of Men... hurrah!

lifespan totally different from the Elves. But I think they were very faithful to the main events, and were able to create storylines that connect them.”

We’ll also see more of Middle-earth than we ever have before. As well as visiting the aforementioned Númenor and Khazad-dûm, we’ll meet the Harfoots, the nomadic ancestors of the Hobbits. And while the series doesn’t *quite* boast a literal cast of thousands, *The Rings Of Power*’s first eight-episode season features 22 regular characters, including familiar faces from *The Lord Of The Rings* (Galadriel and Elrond), a few who’ve appeared in flashbacks and legend (Isildur, Gil-Galad and Elendil), and others who’ve been created for TV.

“Going to worlds that you haven’t seen before really helped the show have its own identity,” says Atienza. “It feels like there’s space to bring a new voice because everything, →



Ismael Cruz Córdova as new character Arondir.

Even so, it seems there’s going to be some fairly major compression of JRR’s centuries-straddling timeline to bring the forging of the Rings, the destruction of the Atlantis-like Númenor, and the rise and fall of Sauron into one TV-friendly arc.

“I think Patrick and JD did great work in putting together all these characters in a timeframe,” says Bayona. “It’s different, because you will see some characters building relationships with characters that during [Tolkien’s] timeframe of the Second Age would have been impossible, because Humans have a



Charlie Vickers as Halbrand, another newbie.



Markella Kavenagh as Elanor “Nori” Brandyfoot.



The island kingdom of Númenor. Pretty, eh?

even the races, is 3,000 years younger. But at the same time, there's always a connection because I think the connections come through the original work."

It's more than 20 years since Peter Jackson's *The Lord Of The Rings* movies became the gold standard for screen fantasy, and *The Return Of The King* took a record-equalling 11 Oscars back to Middle-earth. While *The Rings Of Power* isn't technically part of the same screen universe, the powers that be aren't pretending the beloved trilogy doesn't exist.

"We all love what Peter Jackson did," admits Bayona, "and at the very beginning, we thought about establishing some kind of a bridge between the show and the movies. But then, as you realise the complexity of each world, you get invested in your own story. Then, unconsciously, you start to create something that has its own life."

"The bar was set very high, and I'm glad that Amazon had the ambition of going there – I tried to at least match what Peter Jackson did – but the more we were working with the characters and the story, the more we were unconsciously disconnecting from the movies."

These days epic fantasy is arguably more suited to TV screens than cinemas, as weighty book sagas (and Tolkien descendants) like

“When you read Tolkien’s books, you can tell how much he appreciates beauty”

Game Of Thrones, *The Witcher* and *The Wheel Of Time* are given room to breathe across multiple seasons. Recent advances in on-screen representation will also be evident in *The Rings Of Power*, where the predominantly white and male Middle-earth of Jackson's movies has been replaced by a more diverse world. We'll now see Dwarves, Elves and Humans played by people of colour, and even get our first sighting of a female Dwarf (Sophia Nomvete's Disa).

TO THE ENDS OF MIDDLE-EARTH

"We saw no reason there shouldn't be all kinds of people [in the series]," says Weber. "We spent an enormous amount of time talking about world-building and wanting each world to be true to the material, and there's an enormous amount of discovery that goes into that. We really wanted to find actors for those roles, who just felt that they had Middle-earth in them, this little spark of magic."

"We were open to everyone, and as these people came along, we just felt they inherently were these characters. The cast are really magical, and for us, their performance was above everything."

And for anyone who's spent the last decade in bits after hanging out in Westeros, it's worth remembering that Tolkien's world is light years away from the brutal "all men must die" ethos of *Game Of Thrones*. There's a warmth to the author's characters, a powerful belief that people are capable of wonderful things which – when allied to his love of the natural world – gives Middle-earth a comfortingly homely feel. Aside from the Orcs, Dragons and Trolls, of course...

"When you read Tolkien's books, you can tell how much he appreciates beauty, so the show is full of beauty," explains Bayona. "We also use the biggest canvas possible, CinemaScope, to portray the landscape which, in the books, was always reflecting the mood of the characters. In that sense, Tolkien was very cinematic."

"Tolkien is inherently optimistic, warm and emotional," adds Weber. "This is a man who went through some of the darkest things in human history [in the First World War] and he didn't come out of that and write a despairing, awful story."

"He wrote a story about hope, and a little guy succeeding. We always felt that it was rule number one that there needed to be true optimism and love, even in the darkest, scariest moments of the show."



Bronwyn,
played by
Nazanin
Boniadi.



Expect plenty
of Orc-ward
moments in
the series.



Elrond arrives
in Khazad-
dûm. It's a
pain to heat.



Tyroe
Muhafidin as
Theo, son of
Bronwyn.



Orc number
2,523,114. Or
something like
that.



Laurelin and Telperion, the two trees of Valinor.



Galadriel faces a monstrous... what? Wait and see.



Halbrand has a moody moment to himself.

When it comes to the real-life fear factor, however, the series' much-publicised cost must feel like Sauron's eye burrowing into the back of the creative team's skulls. Not so, they argue.

"I remember the first shot we did," recalls Bayona. "We used a motion-control camera in order to portray the scale, to integrate the different scales of the characters in the same shot. We spent eight hours to do that shot, and our day was 10 hours, so we had two hours left for another shot – but nobody complained about that. Everybody had the ambition that this is the way this story needs to be told."

"The budget was no pressure," Atienza claims. "Actually, we are really very grateful that we had the support of Amazon to bring to the show the resources it needed to do something like this, like really spend the time on a camera move."

"Why? Because you're introducing a character. And it needs to be unforgettable. And sometimes that requires time and requires the means and requires the technology and requires a lot of work behind the scenes to get there."

"So I don't think the budget was pressure, except," she laughs, "we will always want more of it!" ●

The Lord Of The Rings: The Rings Of Power is on Prime Video from 2 September. Read our interviews with the show's cast in the next issue of SFX.

ELF PORTRAITS

Morfydd Clark and Robert Aramayo strive for immortality as Galadriel and Elrond

Both Galadriel and Elrond are familiar to us from the *Lord Of The Rings* trilogy. How do the younger versions you play compare to their older selves?

Robert Aramayo (Elrond): Well, *The Rings Of Power* takes place thousands of years before the original book trilogy, and I think you would say my guy is at the beginning of his career, if you'd like to put it that way. The half-Elven element of him [Elrond has both Elf and Human ancestors] is so important, and was really intriguing to explore. I think it eventually becomes his greatest gift – this ability to bring people together, and an understanding of mortality which is really unique to him – though I don't think he's fully figured out how to use it yet.

Morfydd Clark (Galadriel): The thing that I was obsessed with was that element of immortality. The Elves are kind of the memory of Middle-earth – that's how I see them, anyway – and it was like, she's wise but she's also got an element of naivety. She doesn't have all the power and the gifts that she later has, so it's kind of juggling those things. How can you be both wise and naive?

How much did you look at what Cate Blanchett and Hugo Weaving did in Peter Jackson's movies?

Clark: The films have been such a part of my upbringing that even if I wanted to erase them from my memory, I couldn't. I saw it as a real gift. There was a sense that I was playing this character that didn't know where she was going, but I was like, "I do! You're going to be

Cate Blanchett one day!"

Aramayo: Everything *Lord Of The Rings*-related has always been an enormous part of my life. The inevitable question about Elrond is that he sets a lot of people off on some very dangerous missions, and he plays a very big part in the formation of things, so why didn't he join the Fellowship or something like that? I was always massively intrigued about him, even before I knew about where he came from.

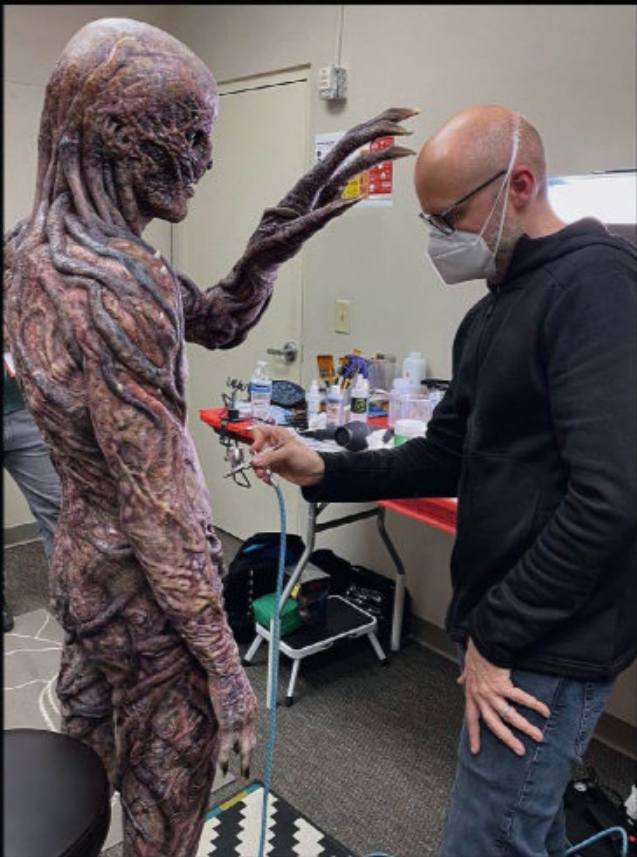
Did shooting in New Zealand make you feel like you were in Middle-earth?

Clark: Yeah, we were very lucky that lots of the sets were practical. And I think also the wonderful thing about doing lots of practical things is that sometimes you get to see an Orc eating a sandwich! Then there's also a layer of visual effects that I'm really looking forward to seeing on top of it, because even without any of that stuff it already looked amazing.

Aramayo: Working with Dwarves is a tricky venture. There was lots of me being on very high ladders while Owain [Arthur, who plays Durin] was sunk into the ground. The challenge of that is something I've never experienced before – it's so unique to something like *The Lord Of The Rings* to make someone very big and someone else very small. It does become easier but I feel like it could overwhelm you because it is a challenge. Luckily, I was working in that context with Owain and Sophia [Nomvete], and they're just a joy.

Elrond and Galadriel: like, get a room, yeah?





The award-winning UK effects house BGFX – headed up by Barrie Gower (left) – came to the attention of the Duffer Brothers for their work on *Game Of Thrones* and *Chernobyl*. Three years later their effects for *Stranger Things* season four villain Vecna have been nominated for an Emmy. Barrie Gower opened up his archives and sat down with *SFX* to talk about creating an iconic monster.

HOW BARRIE GOWER AND HIS TEAM BROUGHT VECNA TO LIFE IN STRANGER THINGS

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT** • PICTURES: **BARRIE GOWER**

UNDER MY

CONCEPT TO CREATION

The Duffer Brothers already had a blueprint for Vecna; they had the outline of the series written. They had some art already drawn up by an incredible concept artist called Michael Mayer, who is also the VFX supervisor. It was always going to be this humanoid character – they were very keen from the get-go to have somebody who had almost fully practical presence. They wanted somebody in prosthetics.

The storyline and tone of season four was starting to become a little bit more mature; there are more nods towards the *Nightmare On Elm Street* franchise. Their idea really was, in the latter few seasons, to have their own iconic villain.

There are a few nuances, a few adjustments we had to make along the way to fit it over the human form. But it's pretty close to those original concept images.

SIZE MATTERS

We broadened part of the head at one point to scale the body slightly differently. The original Vecna design was a little sleeker and longer. We changed some of the forms slightly to lengthen here and there. The left hand, as per the original concept, always had these incredibly long fingers. They were almost one and a half feet long. We built these finger extensions inside the glove which accommodate that length.

It just didn't work: the fingers were bending, and it started to look a bit comical. About two weeks before the final make-up test, we remade the glove, reduced the fingers several inches, so that there's still a good eight to 10 inches long. But that was quite late in the build.

SIN

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

We went out to Atlanta for the final make-up test in November of 2020, with the intention of doing our first shoot day only about three or four days later. So we were hoping, "Oh my god, I hope they approve this." People were apprehensive. Jamie [Campbell Bower] stepped on set [of Vecna's attic in the Creel house] and there were gasps and the Duffers just came over and they were very appreciative and congratulatory. Jamie did some dialogue and it was incredible. I think, from what Jamie said, that was the first time that the Duffer Brothers had also heard his voice properly in character.

READY FOR HIS CLOSE-UP

We shot with him three days later. That first sequence we shot with Vecna was the death of Fred in episode two in the grave. Three days later we shot the end of episode one with Chrissy. That was November and then we had a huge pause and we didn't come back to shoot any more Vecna until May the following year. We knew Vecna was going to shoot for probably about 25 days so we needed that length of time as a production line to build all his duplicate sets of appliances, create a brand new set of appliances every day. We just had this production line, all these bits of rubber jigsaw puzzle pieces that we generated and shipped over to Atlanta.

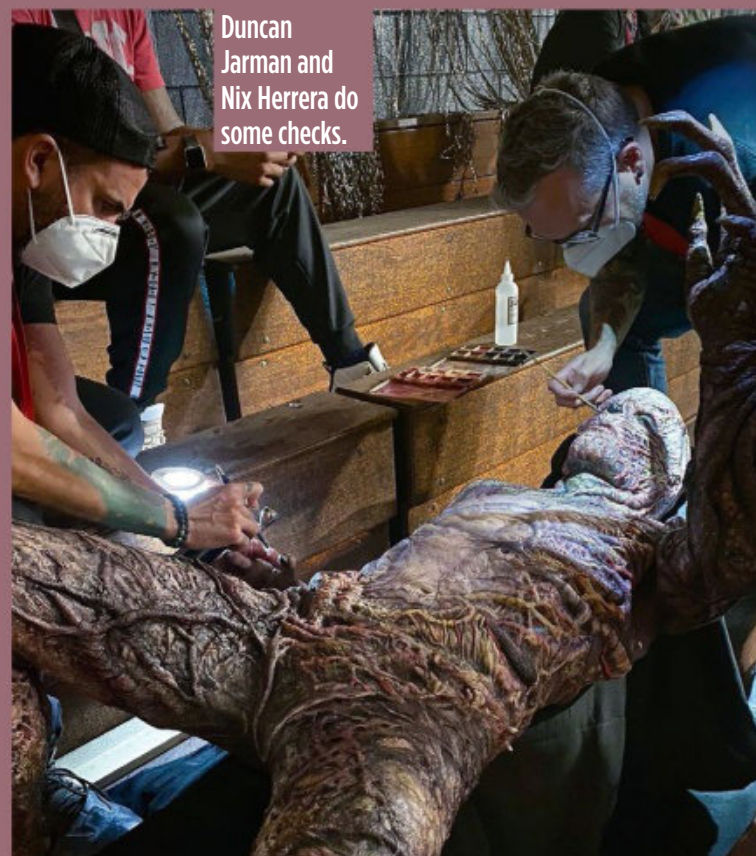
Front and back views of the entire body sculpture.



You've got to have lots of spares when filming!



Jamie Campbell Bower scares himself silly.



Duncan Jarman and Nix Herrera do some checks.



LENDING A HAND

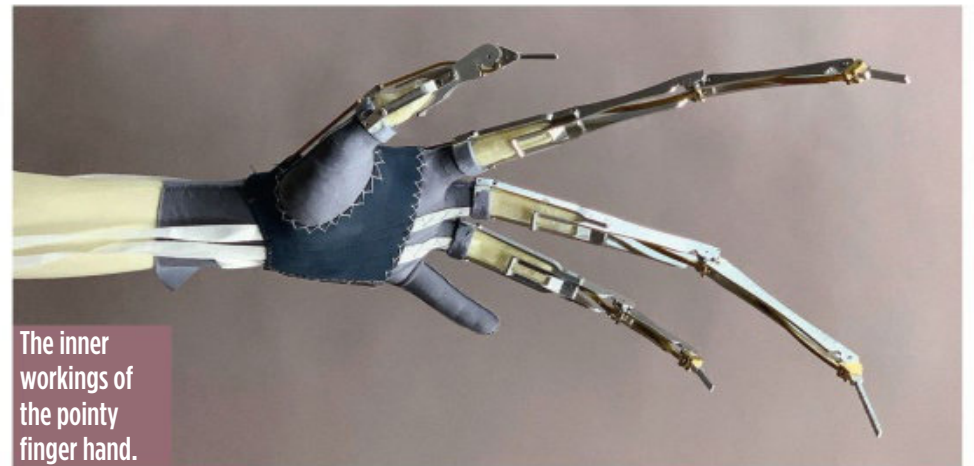
We were trialling the hand ourselves, with mechanical finger extensions, thinking, “This looks fantastic, it’s going to work really well”. But after five minutes the strain on our fingers would be incredible. We bought these exercise bands for tension on your fingers to give to Jamie to build up some of the muscles in his fingers. He wore it for three hours that day, took it off and he had no complaints. He said, “Maybe it’s because I’m a guitarist, and I’ve built muscles in my fingers.” So we never had any problems or any issues.

RUBBER-UP

His left arm, we had his mechanical glove which fitted over his own hand and we had a foam latex sleeve over the top of that which had poppers. It was foam latex because it’s a lighter material, and we have some huge thick vines wrapping around his arm. We made that so it was reusable, but it was only reusable on two or three occasions. Pretty much the rest, apart from a couple of pieces of his legs, were made out of silicone rubber, which has a really fine membrane skin on the edges. We use mineral oils to dissolve the glue and the adhesive and we peel the silicone pieces away and peel it off his skin. But by doing that you completely destroyed all the edges as well. So you can’t reuse these pieces again.

SKINTIGHT

Jamie underneath it is wearing a pair of very tight-fitting briefs and that is it. That’s the only thing he has under the prosthetics. So everything is adhered to his skin. It’s all glued with medical adhesive straight onto his skin. He has a bald cap first because you also have the length of his hair for when he’s playing the orderly. So we had to slick that back, put a bald cap on that and all the appliances overlap that.



The inner workings of the pointy finger hand.



“Hmm, yes, you’ll need to see the hygienist.”



Patt Foad sculpts that menacing claw.



BREATHE, BABY

With his trousers he had an undercarriage which we could un-popper and release him so he could go to the loo. He could unzip and take his shoes off, he could take his left hand off. We didn't cover his armpits. There were certain areas on the left arm which we didn't overlap completely with all the appliances. There are patches on his body which rubber doesn't overlap and cover, so there's areas for his skin to breathe.

The legs are made out of foam latex products, which are pre-glued to a Lycra leggings, so his legs can actually breathe through the prosthetics. I would be concerned about covering somebody absolutely head to toe with no gaps anywhere with a silicone product, because I think that that wouldn't be a good idea. You have to take so many factors into consideration when you're creating such an extensive character and three quarters of his body is pretty much covered by prosthetics.

SET THE TONE

The preparation in the morning is almost as important as the application itself. We would cleanse the skin first, getting a lot of the oils out so things adhered to the skin properly. We would be using toners and there are also preparation barriers you can put on which also protect the skin from overheating, perspiration and rashes.

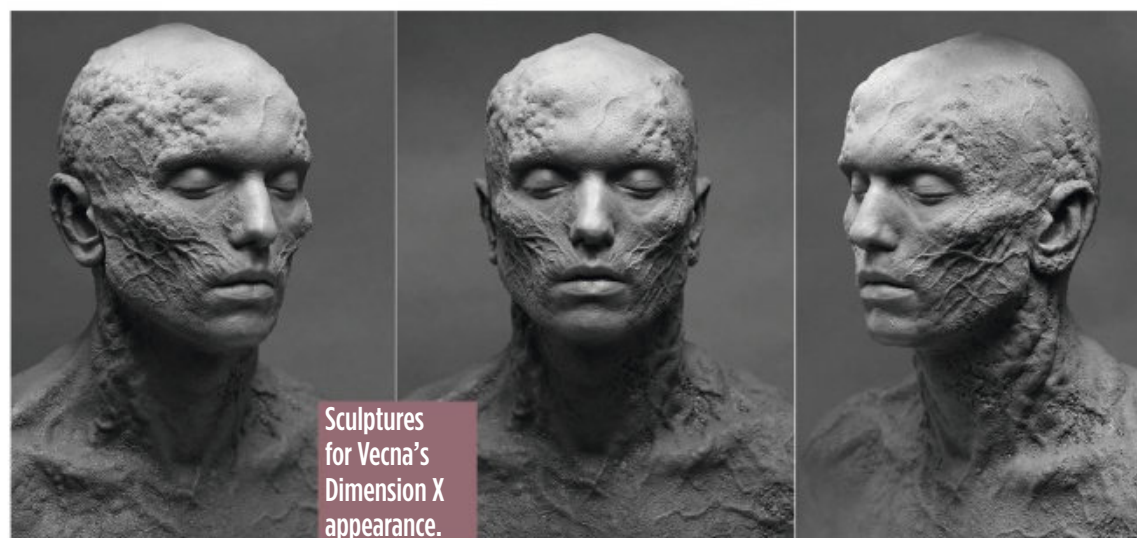
WHAT VILLAINS ARE MADE OF

The adhesives we use to glue all the products on are medical silicone adhesives. The pieces are made out of medical-grade silicone as well. So the actual gel-filled appliances that we glue onto Jamie are made out of the same material as breast implants.



Barrie Gower does a little Vecna touching-up.

"Be honest with me, doc... just how bad is it?"



Sculptures for Vecna's Dimension X appearance.



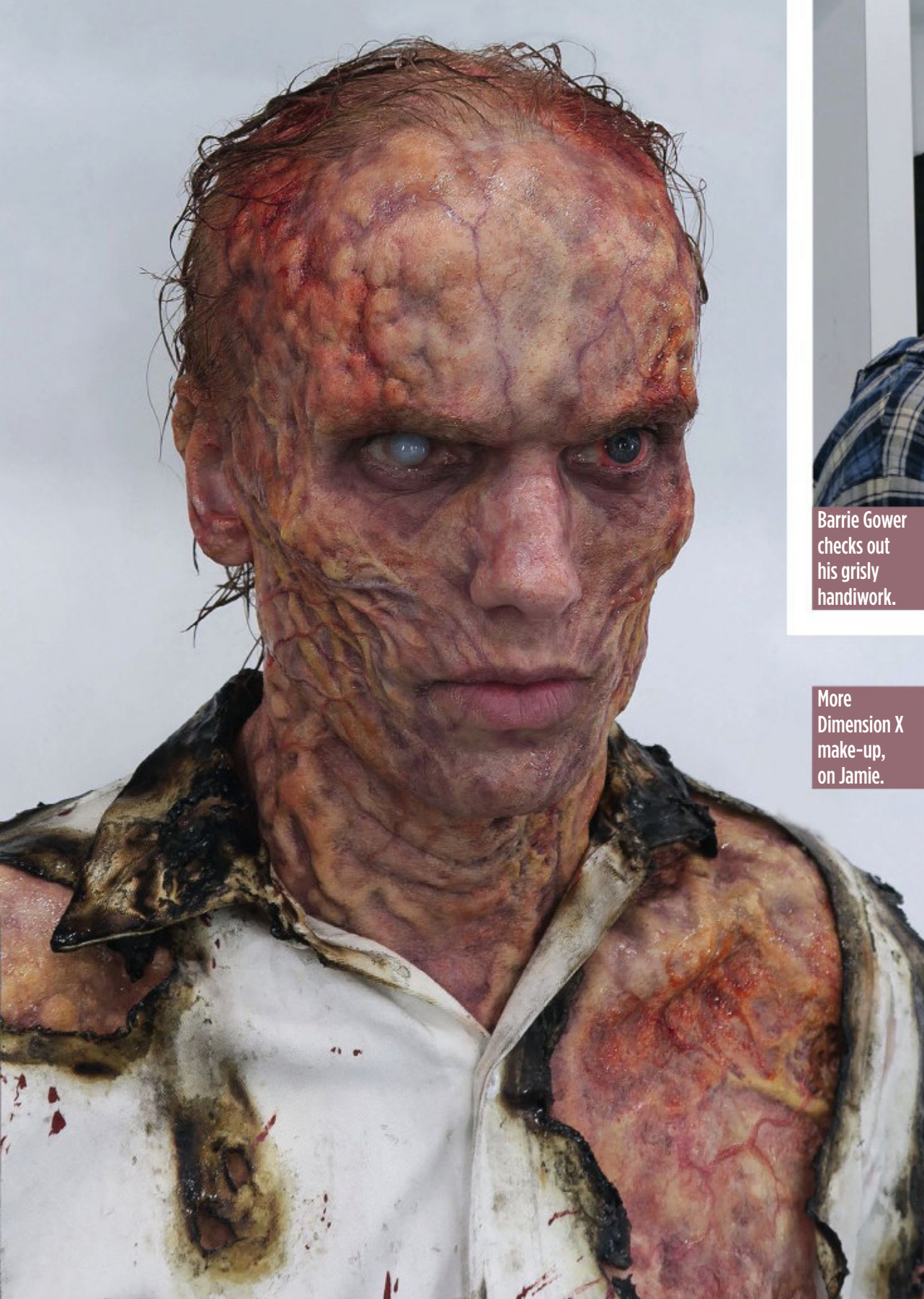
"Gonna sneeze... gonna... no, it's gone."



Paula Eden and Joel Hall adding a paint job.



Duncan Jarman sculpts Dimension X make-up.



Barrie Gower checks out his grisly handiwork.

More Dimension X make-up, on Jamie.

STRANGER THINGS

MAKE-UP CALL

We would start at any time from about 3am in the morning and we'd spend on average about seven hours getting into everything. It wouldn't be until about the five-hour mark that we pretty much had everything glued on or pulled on. Then he would step on set and we would do maybe an eight-to-10-hour shooting day. By the time we would wrap up in the evening, it would take about an hour and a half to take everything off. He would be wearing everything for a good 12 to 14 hours. He was always in an air-conditioned tent next to the set, because it is like a second skin.

JAMIE'S FIRST REACTIONS

I think he was very surprised that a lot of what he was doing underneath was translating through the prosthetics as well. When he breathes, you can see his chest increasing and deflating. A lot of his facial movement was coming through the pieces as well. With any prosthetics, when you're giving somebody quite a thick second skin, actors have to almost over-exaggerate everything as well for things to read through. So it was a good process for him, just to get used to the weight and the feel of everything prior to doing that final camera test. But his response was super-positive.

SINKING FEELING

When Sadie Sink first met Jamie in the Vecna makeup for episode four, her reaction was fantastic. It was brilliant – she was terrified, which is exactly what we wanted.

Stranger Things is on Netflix now.



Buckethead Vecna: a possible new spin-off?



You'd look like this too after 10 hours of filming.

ELLA BALINSKA

The real-life gamer on her role in the new *Resident Evil* TV series

Words by Steve O'Brien /// Photography by Tatenda Chidora

Right now, I'm in my gaming cave!" Ella Balinska proudly states to *SFX*. In a gleaming white space somewhere in Los Angeles, it's clear that the Westminster-born actor is living her best life now. A self-declared gaming geek, she's now the lead in the TV adaptation of one of the greatest games of all time – and indeed one of her own favourites: *Resident Evil*. "I've actually just restarted *Resident Evil 2*, 'cos that was my favourite!" she says.

In Netflix's latest reimagining of the iconic zombie franchise, Balinska is the adult Jade Wesker, sharing the role with 17-year-old Tamara Smart, who plays the teenage Jade in the modern day (the show takes place in both 2022 and 2036). It meant that she was away from home for most of the year, filming in South Africa. Now it's finally out, will she be watching the episodes with her mates? "Oh yeah," she laughs. "Cos now I can say, look what I was away doing for eight months!"

Because of the dual timelines, presumably you didn't actually get to work with the actors from the 2022 storyline, like Lance Reddick and Tamara Smart?

➡ It's such a good question. Not many people have quite clicked onto that yet. I didn't spend a single day on set with the other half of the cast. It's absolutely bizarre. Obviously, we went and visited, and we watched them work and film some key scenes, but I didn't really cross paths with them because of the timelines. We did both film in South Africa, but our experiences were very different! The 2022 timeline was largely filmed during the day, whereas most of my stuff was at night. I hung out with Tamara, but we just didn't work together. We compared notes and got into the nitty gritty of what we wanted to do with Jade. Tamara's like a little sister to me.

It's a pretty action-heavy show. What's your training regime like?

➡ It's constantly staying fight-ready. But during the pandemic, my hyper-fixation was working out so it wasn't too much of a journey to get into that physical space. But you know, you're going take after take after take doing these extraordinary things... That's the other aspect of it. I actually trained in ju-jitsu, which I hadn't before, simply because Jade, she's not a superhero, she's not someone who is trained to survive in the zombie apocalypse. She's a

survivalist and she's a scientist. So we wanted all the fighting to feel genuinely like it was moment to moment, as opposed to these huge choreographed sequences where you're like, "Yeah, the protagonist is gonna make it out."

Do you know yet about whether you're going to be doing a second series of *Resident Evil*?

➡ Oh, that's a conversation I'm not included in. I have heard whispers about things that could be happening, so I'll have to get back to you on that.

If it does happen though, that'll be another eight months away from your gaming cave.

➡ Listen, season two will be a very different filming experience! [Laughs] When I went to South Africa the first time I flew with my PlayStation 4 in my hand luggage, because I was aware we were having to do the quarantine thing at the time. So everywhere I go, I sort of tear apart the back panel of the wall trying to find the HDMI socket to plug in my console. Hopefully with season two, I'll be able to have a little bit more of a set-up.

You were in *Charlie's Angels* back in 2019. Was it disappointing that it didn't get a sequel?

➡ We just really wanted to have some fun with these awesome characters. There's always space for strong, empowered female characters on screen, but authentic depictions of them. The amount of joy, even now, that *Charlie's Angels* has brought to so many people, honestly it's the reason why we do what we do. But to answer your question, I have no idea, I wasn't part of that conversation. But we had a great time!

So what's on the horizon?

➡ Well, talking of videogames, I have *Forspoken* coming out in October. I'm the lead character and it's my likeness.

Isn't that going to be weird to play?

➡ Yes! But when I was a kid, and I was gaming and I was playing *Tekken*, I was picking Raven, because she looked similar to me. The fact that an eight-year-old in this present day could now pick that character to play is... Honestly, I've had people asking me this, and I haven't quite put the words together to explain how great it is. It's mind-blowing. ●

Resident Evil is on Netflix now.

BIODATA

From Westminster, London

Greatest Hits
MI6 agent-turned-Angel in Elizabeth Banks's 2019 *Charlie's Angels* reboot; single mother Charie in 2020 horror *Run Sweetheart Run*.

Random Fact
Balinski's mother is chef Lorraine Pascale, while her stepmum is model Sophie Anderton.

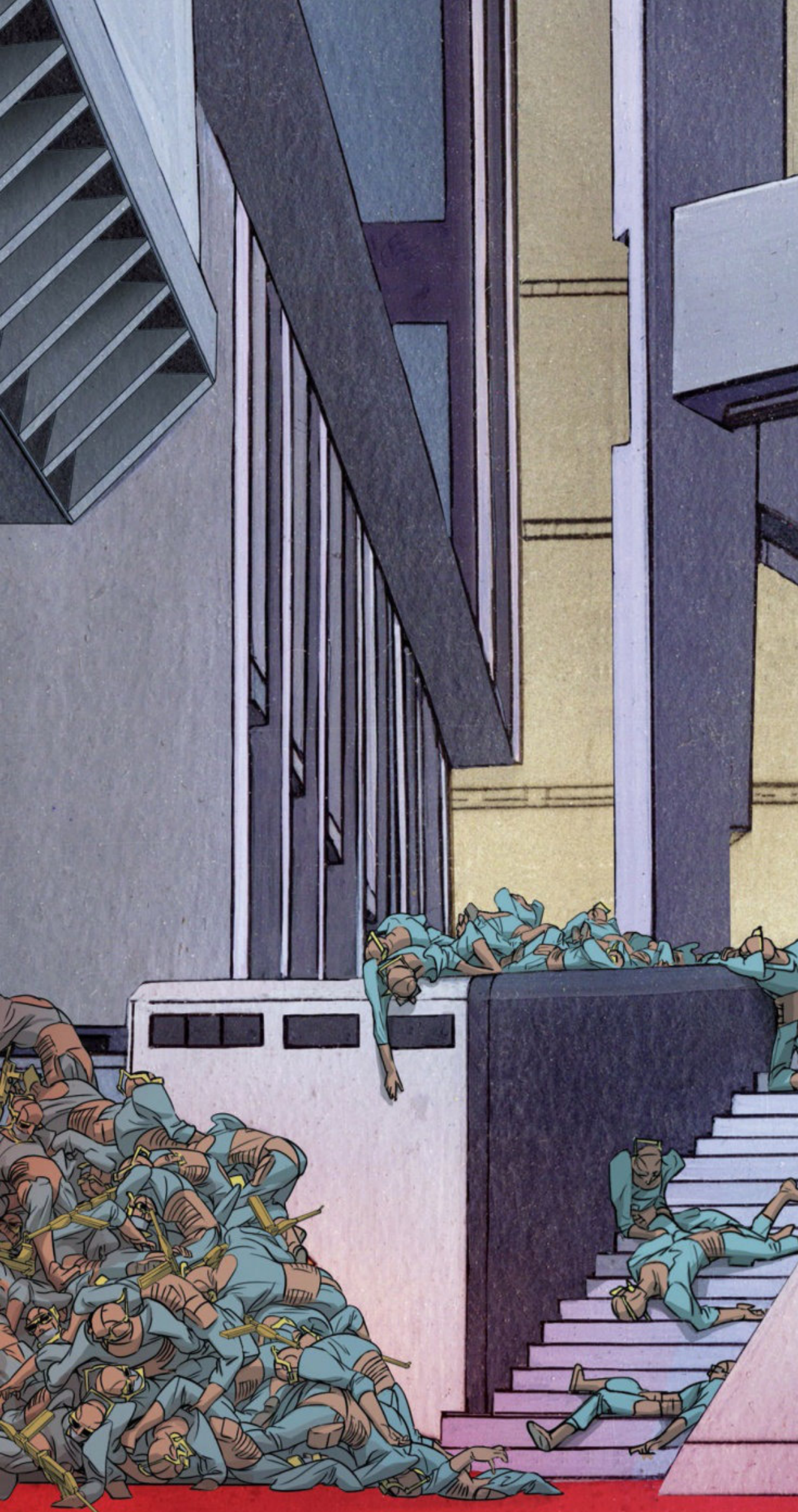
“ When I first
went to South
Africa I flew with
my PlayStation 4
in hand luggage ”

AEON FLUX

FLUX

INCAPACITATOR





IN 1991, PETER CHUNG'S **AEON FLUX** FLOORED MTV'S AUDIENCE WITH ITS THRILLING, SEXY AND INTELLIGENT ANIMATED STORIES

WORDS: LEILA LATIF

IN THE EARLY 1990S, MTV HAD unparalleled cultural currency. As well as showcasing the frontline of music, it explored other media, including experimental, edgy animation via its series *Liquid Television*.

One of the jewels in its crown was *Aeon Flux*. Created by Peter Chung, it challenged audiences not only with its heavily stylised action, featuring bloody massacres, but also by confronting ethical and existential quandaries. *Aeon* faced off against Trevor Goodchild: she an agent from the anarchic Monica, he the benign dictator of the ordered but oppressive Bregna – though to simplify the motives at play would underserve its rich complexity.

Chung devised *Aeon Flux* in part to explore the ambiguity behind what could easily have been labelled as a simple utopia vs dystopia narrative. But his background was in work that was much more innocuous. “I studied animation at CalArts [California Institute of the Arts] and went to work at Disney, and then on the original *Transformers* series,” Chung tells *SFX*. There, he was out of step with many of his colleagues, who felt that animation should be limited to stories that were simple or for children. “When you’re working in animation, it’s a lot of kids’ programmes. I did *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *Rugrats*, but I’d always been interested in making animation for adults.”

ADULT FILMS

Away from the Californian sunshine, however, the idea of animation filled with political satire, complex morality, sexuality and gore was nothing new. Chung had grown up in Korea, exposed to all that in Japanese animation.

Liquid Television created not only *Aeon Flux* but also slacker series *Beavis And Butt-Head* and surreal alien comedy *The Head*, using independent animators and artists. “Originally, it was animated parodies of everything that’s on television,” Chung explains, “and I pitched *Aeon Flux* as a parody of action shows.”

But *Aeon Flux* was much more than a parody, as Chung sneaked in a far more intricate piece of work, with rich, complex ideas communicated without any dialogue, and layers of intrigue that would reward rewatching. “It was really built into the idea of telling a story without words or explanation. MTV was going to be showing these episodes again and again. My fear was that somebody watching the show would say, ‘Well, I’ve seen that before’ and change the channel, so I →



It's a Health and Safety nightmare, we tell you.

wanted to make it engaging even after multiple viewings.”

The pilot episode, a masterpiece in visual storytelling, begins with Aeon catching a fly with her eyelashes, before unleashing bloody fury on the Breen forces. Over 12 wordless minutes (chopped up into two-minute segments on its original broadcast) the perspective on her actions continually shifts.

DIE ANOTHER DAY

“Each two-minute segment had its own arc,” Chung explains. “In the first two minutes she’s completely heroic. In the next you start to have doubts, because it’s from the point of view of her enemies. I used a lot of directing tricks to get you to guess what she’s doing. It’s telling the story without explaining anything.”

But such ambition had to be snuck in, as TV executives might be less daring. “I didn’t want to pitch it that way to MTV, because that might seem obscure, academic and experimental – which it was!”

This first “season” ends with Aeon standing on a stray nail and falling to her death, something which for Chung was a key conceit. “She dies for no reason, upending the idea of the hero always succeeding.” This would continue throughout the series, with Aeon regularly meeting a sticky end.

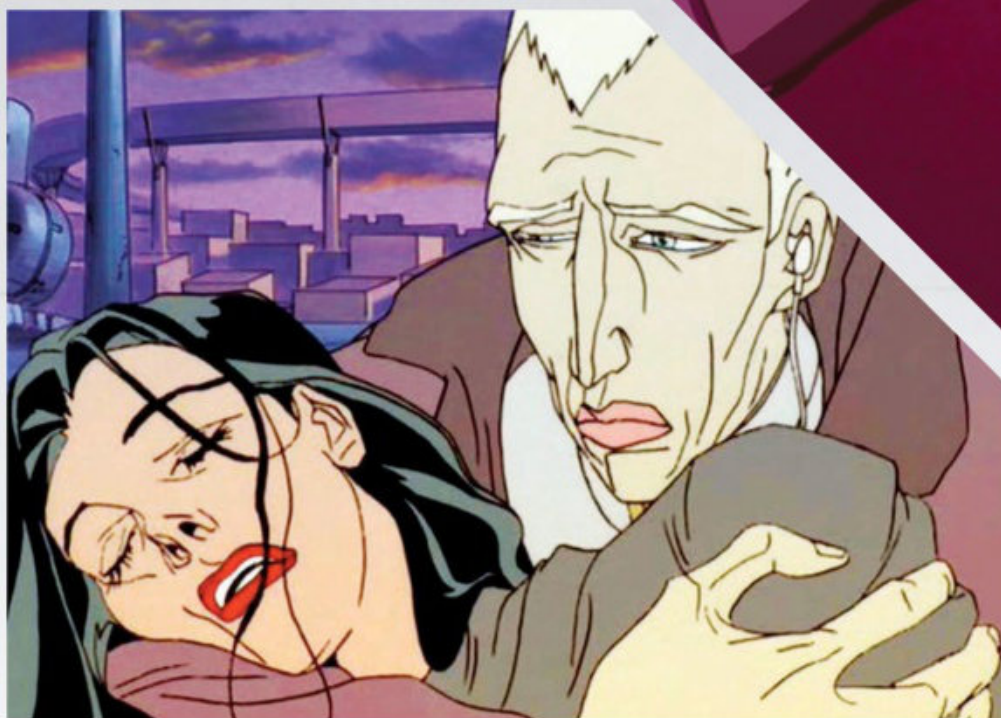
The second series episode “War” even has her dying in the first few moments. The perspective then shifts to that of her killer, who in turn is run through with a sword; the action then shifts to *their* murderer, emphasising the arbitrary assignment of heroism. The show is filled with futile acts of bravery and tragic outcomes that leave the viewer questioning just what the cost of freedom should be.

While *Aeon Flux* was offering something distinct thematically, its aesthetic was just as unmistakable. Freed from the limitations of *Rugrats*’ chubby toddlers, Chung brought us

GRAPHIC CONTENT

The graphic novel is not to be trusted

A tie-in graphic novel published in 1995, *The Herodotus File*, provided Aeon and Trevor Goodchild’s backstory. Chung himself was not keen. “I was always against the idea of providing any backstory or exposition material, and had a big debate with the publisher,” he says. “Their idea was to create canonical reference, but I wanted it to be fluid. Once you provide canon, people filter everything that happens through that lens. So we compromised, where it purported to be canon but is also framed as propaganda. If you want to believe it you are free to do that, but if you read between the lines it’s all misinformation. What’s funny is the movie took it all at face value, and the material ended up in the movie as being an explanation of the world. Ridiculous!”



What the Flux is going on? You have to decide.

Flux down... but there’ll be another along in a mo.

muscular and sinewy bodies, able to defeat armies while bound in kinky PVC, and use long flexible tongues to extract tiny messages from drawers in their back molars. The art of the series has been compared to everything from anime to German expressionism. Chung, however, says “I try not to think in those terms. When I look at any animation I try not to think of it as just being of a culture. I wasn’t trying to fit into a category. Developing as an artist, I was influenced by a lot of different things, but my favourite artist at the time was [Austrian painter] Egon Schiele.”

It’s an aesthetic which would inspire the Wachowskis in *The Matrix* (Chung himself would later go on to work on *The Animatrix*). But Chung doesn’t see himself as borrowing from any particular style. “It’s what I draw naturally,” he says, “My style as an artist is just the way I draw.”

The fact that the characters of *Aeon Flux* were not bound by the material laws of physics or anatomy did take inspiration from a particular quarter, however. “You’re really trying to express the ID of the character, trying

to make the internal external,” Chung explains. “I’m very inspired by Warner Bros cartoons like *Daffy Duck*. No living human would ever behave the way he does, but it’s an external expression of how they feel inside. If you’re frantic, there’s an expression, ‘You’re bouncing off the walls’, but with *Daffy Duck* he *literally* bounces off the walls. With *Aeon Flux*, I tried to apply some of that idea.”

Despite Chung’s uncompromising vision, *Aeon Flux* struck a chord with viewers. The pilot was picked up for a second season of five short episodes and then a third run of 30-minute instalments, with dialogue added for the longer episodes. “I had no problem with adding dialogue,” Chung says. “It would start to become a little too gimmicky if you were doing a whole half-hour without anybody speaking.” But the inclusion of dialogue did come with a caveat: “I didn’t want to use dialogue to *explain*.”

Directing duties were split between Chung and Howard E Baker – another veteran of *Rugrats*. Huge existential questions about violence, liberty and religion were at the fore.



You can face anything with some strong lipply.

Aeon's mission, and her relationship with Goodchild, is complicated by wars, clones, and in one episode murderous intention towards a facsimile of God.

As unique a protagonist as Aeon was, for '90s audiences she was also revolutionary simply by dint of being a woman, something which helped to open the floodgates for more female action stars. "It was before *Tomb Raider*, *Underworld* and *Resident Evil* and all these kick-ass, gun-toting female heroes," says Chung, who had set out to subvert the limitations of what an action hero could be.

AEON FLOPS

The 2005 movie was a dud

The big-screen adaptation squandered a talented cast, led by Charlize Theron, and missed the point of the source material. "Not only do the series and the film bear no relationship to each other, they're opposites," Chung says. "Everything that I pushed back against, they succumbed to! Their motive was that *Underworld* was doing well, so Paramount said, 'What could be our *Underworld*?' It had nothing to do with original stories and character. It's a double-edged sword," he adds. "Nobody liked it and it was a flop at the box office, but it helped keep the name alive, and people... went back to watch the original."



"We weren't used to seeing female action heroes. But I wasn't really thinking consciously about female empowerment. I wanted the character to be as loaded with associations as possible, to feel as provocative an image as possible."

The sexiness of Aeon was integral to her identity. Her outfits would have fitted in in any S&M dungeon, and the look was topped with a razor-sharp bob that felt like it could be used as a weapon in the right circumstances. The show's sexual tension was palpable, and it portrayed kink and fetish without any moralistic subtext.

While at the time it was embraced by fans as the epitome of cool, Chung (who now teaches at the USC School of Cinematic Arts) has seen first-hand how it sits less easily with some of the younger generation: "I can tell with some of my young female students that they just have a problem with the way the character is dressed." But even the more puritanical among us have to concede that Aeon's interior was just as provocative as her exterior.

This was an anti-hero with roots in '70s films like *The Godfather*, *Chinatown* and *The French Connection*. The worlds of Monica and Bregna

“You can’t justify any definition of objective morality. It is an artificially constructed system”

defy simple explanation, as Chung wanted to get away from a binary idea of goodness. "Looking back on *Star Wars*, it is very moralistic," he argues. "*The Lord Of The Rings* is very religious and quite honestly racist. The Hobbits are good, the Dwarves are one way, the Orcs are bad, because of their race, not because of who they are individually."

In contrast, *Aeon Flux* looks below the surface. As Chung puts it, "You can't justify any definition of objective morality. It is an artificially constructed system of measurement." Chung grew up as the son of a Korean diplomat, and his background helped to shape the two nations of Monica and Bregna. "I was very much thinking about North and South Korea. There's a very arbitrary border, but the people are the same people."

There's still a chance we'll see *Aeon* again, in some form. "There is talk right now at MTV of reviving it as a live-action TV series, and I'm not involved," says Chung. "But I hope that someday I will get a chance to do it again. I have ideas for where I could go further." ●

Aeon Flux: The Complete Animated Collection is available on DVD and Blu-ray.

RF KUANG

Magic words: the writer of *The Poppy War* tells us about her new novel

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by Mike Styer

THERE ARE THOSE WHO FALL HARD FOR Oxford. And there are those whose feelings are more ambivalent. While she's an Oxford graduate who earlier this year returned to the city of dreaming spires to give the JRR Tolkien Lecture on Fantasy Literature, Rebecca F Kuang falls into the latter category.

"I have a lot of conflicted feelings about Oxford," she says. "On the one hand, it's such a beautiful illusion. I think a common theme in many dark academia novels – Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, for example – involves longing and desire to be a part of this beautiful, aesthetic, deeply intellectual world. But the fact of the matter is that that world is only accessible to certain bodies. That's something I felt acutely when I was at Oxford."

Not only was Kuang an American abroad but she was also "a woman of colour at an institution that... still hasn't done very much to reckon with its colonial roots". The tensions here are front and centre in Kuang's new novel *Babel*, a critique of Oxford set in an alternate 19th-century Oxford where the Royal Institute of Translation, aka Babel, is a key institution of empire. Not only is Babel a world centre of translation but it's a place where lecturers and students practice silver-working, in which silver bars' magical powers are manifested through translation.

NO SUCH THING AS AN ACCIDENT

Within this rarefied atmosphere Robin Swift, born (like Kuang) in China, is an academic star, but one who is constantly reminded of his outsider status. "I've always really enjoyed writing from the border because I think that's where the most interesting conflict comes from," says Kuang.

"But in one sense, Robin is a perfectly typical Victorian subject, because *Babel* is structured as a kind of subversion of the classic Victorian bildungsroman, in that he's a young man making his way up in the world. He's going to an elite university, he's making friends, he's learning about how the world works, and he's gradually accruing social and economic capital as he does so. So it's a parallel of character arcs like that of Pip in *Great Expectations*."

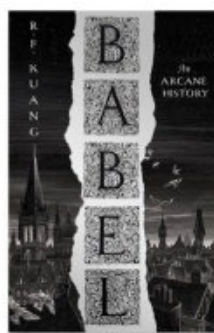
Except while Charles Dickens's protagonists so often find a place in society, Kuang's preoccupations are rather different. As someone who's pursuing a parallel career in academia, Kuang describes herself as "a very themes-orientated writer". With *Babel* she specifically references the First Opium War, fought by the British so they could sell

BIODATA

From
**Guangzhou,
China**

Greatest Hits
***The Poppy War* (2018) was nominated for a clutch of awards, including the Nebula. The trilogy was rounded out by *The Dragon Republic* (2019) and *The Burning God* (2020).**

Random Fact
Kuang wrote a short story about a Rebel Alliance defender on Hoth for 2020 collection *From A Certain Point Of View: The Empire Strikes Back*. "It was so much fun!"



narcotics into China and reverse a trade deficit, as she discusses "how power and race and trade networks work".

While her novels are underpinned by a fierce intelligence and big ideas, she's a storyteller whose debut *The Poppy War* had reviewers making comparisons with NK Jemisin, Ken Liu and, from another generation, Robin Hobb. Impressive for someone sometimes described as an "accidental novelist" – an idea Kuang pushes back against: "It's fun to joke about being an accidental novelist, but that would imply that I never had any interest in writing professionally and that I hadn't been doing it my entire life, which I have been."

DEAR DIARY...

Growing up in suburban Dallas after her parents emigrated, she used writing almost as a kind of therapy. "I used to do this weird thing where I would keep a diary," she remembers. "But instead of faithfully transcribing what I was feeling and things I was going through, I would filter it off through the voices of fictional characters living in fantastical settings."

"In high school, I had this whole world where children were living in abandoned skyscrapers of this post-apocalyptic world, and they were flying around on hoverboards. This never materialised into a proper novel, because I didn't know how to structure a book back then. But every time I was going through something, that was all expressed through the characters. I didn't realise that at the time, but that's exactly what my creative process is."

It's a process she applied while working and studying in China on a gap year, when she learnt about her family history from her grandparents. These conversations helped to inspire *The Poppy War*, as did the sense of "ancient history" she felt in Beijing. Sending the book to agents "on a whim", she landed a publishing deal. Her path was decided, she says, because she signed a deal for a trilogy, which "locks you into producing more on a schedule, which is terrible".

For all that she critiques academia, perhaps a part of Kuang will always prefer the classroom, where the "eureka moments" occur "in the seminar room where you're digesting very difficult ideas together". She adds: "It's those moments that motivate and inspire my fiction. Everything I write is guided by whatever academic questions are bothering me at the moment." ●

Babel is published by HarperVoyager on 1 September.

“I had this world where children were living in abandoned skyscrapers”

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NOPE

Don't Look Up



▶ **RELEASED** 12 AUGUST

15 | 135 minutes

▶ Director **Jordan Peele**

▶ Cast **Daniel Kaluuya, Keke Palmer, Steven Yeun, Michael Wincott, Brandon Perea, Keith David**

➔ **In just five short years, the** status of a Jordan Peele film has gone from intriguing outlier (*Get Out*) to major talking point (*Us*) to full-blown cultural phenomenon. For a comparable filmic trajectory, you have to go back to the glorious early run M Night Shyamalan enjoyed at the start of his career: the one that came out of the blocks sprinting with *The Sixth Sense*, hit its stride with *Unbreakable* and breasted the tape with *Signs*. (You could also cite Quentin Tarantino's meteoric rise from *Reservoir Dogs* to *Pulp Fiction*, had not the second movie in his triptych, *True Romance*, been directed by somebody else.)

The comparison is apt in that both *Signs* and Peele's latest offering *Nope* are alien invasion movies involving siblings in isolated rural settings. And *Nope*, like *Signs* before it, signifies a small but significant drop-off in impact and quality. Taken on its own merits, *Nope* is a supremely entertaining, expertly assembled

and visually arresting jaw-dropper. Compared to *Get Out* and *Us*, however, it feels a little safe and conventional: the work of a filmmaker opting to consolidate his strengths rather than stretch their capabilities and boundaries.

You can see as much in the casting of *Get Out*'s Daniel Kaluuya in the central role of OJ, a reticent man of very few words who, following his father's death, has reluctantly taken over the family business. That is Haywood Hollywood Horses, which – as OJ's gregarious sister Emerald (Keke Palmer) is quick to point out – stands alone as the movie industry's only black-owned supplier of stunt-trained equines.

The reality – a dusty ranch in the Santa Clarita Valley – isn't quite as impressive, as it has barely a handful of hay-chewers, mounting debts having forced OJ to sell off his livestock to the Western-themed amusement park operated by his brash neighbour Ricky (Steven Yeun).

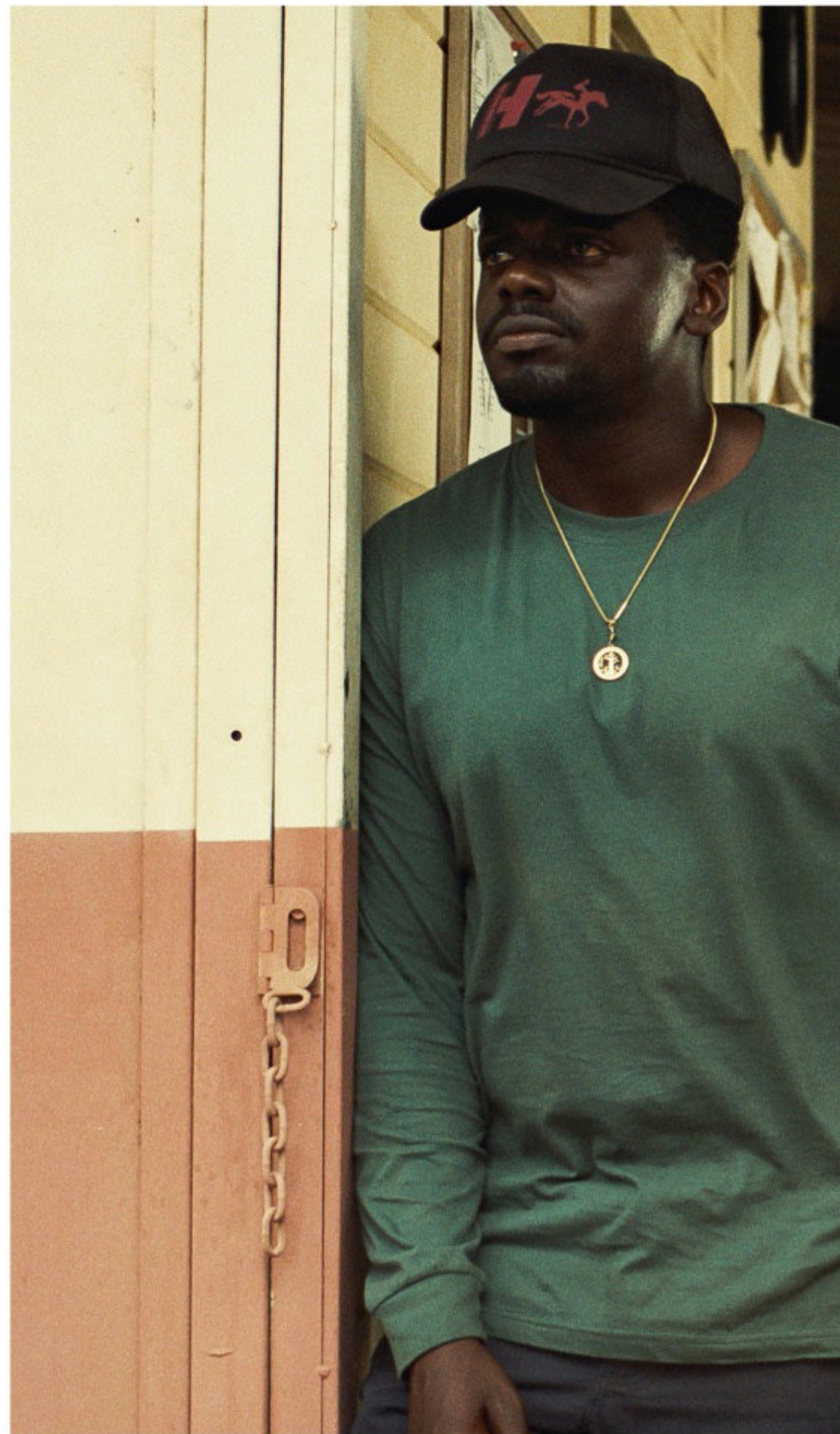
Ricky, we come to discover, is a former child actor whose career in TV sitcoms was cut short by a freakish on-set incident involving a rogue chimpanzee. (Terrific mo-cap here from Terry Notary, by the way.) That, however, is by the by, OJ and Emerald's more

pressing concern being an unidentified flying object that appears to have taken a liking to both their property and their horses. Emerald's money-making brainwave is to get this on film and use the windfall it generates to keep the business afloat.

Having enlisted the services of young tech wizard Angel (Brandon Perea) and veteran cinematographer Antlers Holst (Michael Wincott), though, the siblings soon realise their visitor is not only stubbornly camera-shy but also not to be trifled with.

“Signifies a small but significant drop-off in impact and quality”

As a sci-fi genre piece, *Nope* sits squarely in the tradition that previously brought us *The War Of The Worlds*, *Independence Day* and *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*. The influence of Peele's recent reboot of *The Twilight Zone* is also clearly evident, with *Nope* at times resembling an extended



“Hello up there! Loved your work on *Pointless!*”



version of one of Rod Serling's cautionary fables. As you expect from this director, there's a sprinkling of social commentary, the Haywoods' place on the industry food chain being roughly analogous to the animals they feed and water. A connection is made to Eadweard Muybridge's photographic studies of a black jockey on a horse, from which the rider's name has been tellingly expunged. And there is a great deal of humour too, with much of it coming from Wincott's Captain Ahab-like lensman. At one point,

for no apparent reason his character recites the lyrics of 1950s novelty song "The Purple People Eater" as if he's delivering Quint's USS Indianapolis monologue from *Jaws*.

What aren't to be found here, at least in any great abundance anyway, are genuine heart-in-mouth scares. Even when the Haywoods' homestead is being showered with a literal bloodbath, *Nope's* chosen register stays fixed on the moderately chilling – a default that continues up to and beyond the point the alien's real

nature (and anatomy) are spectacularly unveiled.

Peele's avowed aim was to make a "flying saucer horror film" that could hopefully lay claim to be "the Great American UFO movie". What he's given us, though, is just another American UFO movie: one that, while great fun to watch and admirable in its intentions, does not so much break ground as stylishly and knowingly retread it.

Neil Smith

i Peele's original title for *Nope* was *Little Green Men*, an allusion not just to aliens but also to dollar bills.



KEKE PALMER

Emerald Haywood
in *Nope*



What excited you about this movie?

→ You had me with Daniel [Kaluuya]. My first experience with him was the *Black Mirror* episode that he did. I nerd out about filmmaking and TV and performances that I enjoy, and I remember calling people and saying "Did you see that black boy on *Black Mirror*? He is incredible!" I was blown away by his performance, so when I heard that I was not only going to be doing a Jordan Peele movie but I was going to be in it with Daniel Kaluuya? That was next-level excitement.

How collaborative is Jordan as a filmmaker?

→ He allowed us to be part of every aspect of the conversation, even the title. Obviously he's the boss, and at the end of the day what he says goes, but the way that he respects us as actors is really empowering. He lets us know he trusts us with the roles he's given us.

What does the Western location bring to the movie?

→ It brings a different ambience. It really shapes the vibe and feel of my character. We had a really clear world that had been created by Jordan and it inspires us as actors to play within that space. **NS**

KELLY LEE BARRETT/GETTY

THREE THOUSAND YEARS OF LONGING

It's Miller time!



▶ **RELEASED 2 SEPTEMBER**

TBC | 108 minutes

▶ Director **George Miller**

▶ Cast **Tilda Swinton, Idris Elba, Aamito Lagum, Nicolas Mouawad**

“My story is true, but you’re more likely to believe it if I tell it as a fairy tale,” announces Dr Alitheia Binnie at the beginning of George Miller’s latest. An artful ode to love and the love of storytelling, *Three Thousand Years Of Longing* is, well, 3,000 miles away from the 100mph, petrol-fumed brilliance of the Australian director’s last film, 2015’s *Mad Max: Fury Road*.

Adapted from the novella *The Djinn In The Nightingale’s Eye* by AS Byatt, the film begins as narratology academic Binnie (Tilda Swinton) arrives in Istanbul to deliver a lecture.

On a visit to a souk, she buys a small glass trinket, which she dutifully cleans back in her hotel bathroom. Before she knows what’s happening, a djinn (Idris Elba) appears. Or rather, in the first of Miller’s gleefully extravagant visualisations, his giant golden foot squeezes itself into her bedroom.

When he takes on human size, as is customary, this generous genie offers her three wishes,

anything her heart desires, in exchange for his freedom. But the cautious, clever but also isolated Binnie refuses, knowing just how dangerous such wish-fulfilment can be. Instead, what unfolds is an exchange between these two lost souls, as they unburden their past lives to one another.

The djinn’s backstory is where Miller goes to town. Imprisoned by a magician for three millennia (“Can you imagine the loneliness?” he cries), his journey takes him via

“An exchange between two lost souls, as they unburden their past lives”

the Queen of Sheba (Aamito Lagum) and into the Ottoman Empire. True, *Three Thousand Years* may tire those looking for the action of Miller’s last film, but this is the director of *Babe* and *The Witches Of Eastwick* at the wheel. The enjoyment comes in allowing yourself to be swept up by it all.

It’s largely a two-hander, and Swinton and Elba are captivating on-screen together, especially in a third act that does finally leave the hotel room and returns to London. It’s also sumptuously designed, particularly the flashbacks to ancient times, with Miller’s imagination (and John Seale’s cinematography) working overtime.

A simple story of love and loneliness, it’s also a magical tale bursting with passion and flair.

James Mottram

i Idris Elba came up with the djinn’s own natural language himself, by basically just speaking in tongues.



BODIES BODIES BODIES



▶ **RELEASED 9 SEPTEMBER**

15 | 95 minutes

▶ Director **Halina Reijn**

▶ Cast **Amandla Stenberg, Maria Bakalova, Pete Davidson, Lee Pace**

While so many horror-comedies manage to be neither funny or scary, Halina Reijn’s first English-language feature manages plenty of laughs, punctuated by solid jump-scares. Putting a spin on the classic trope of teens stuck in a cabin in the woods, *Bodies Bodies Bodies* traps the shy working-class Bee (Maria Bakalova) in a gaudy mansion with her girlfriend Sophie’s (Amandla Stenberg) group of obnoxious privileged friends, during a hurricane that cuts the electricity and the Wi-Fi.

The gang decide to play a cruel childhood game called “Bodies Bodies Bodies” which, combined with plenty of booze, illicit substances and paranoia, kickstarts an evening of ruined relationships, cruel revelations and bloody madness.

The excellent comic timing of this impressive ensemble sells the cutting Gen Z dialogue, but Reijn’s filmmaking has such style that wordless journeys through the house, lit only by a phone torch, are just as entertaining. Tonally balanced perfectly between comedy of errors and teen slasher, with almost as much punchy satire as modern classic *Scream*, *Bodies Bodies Bodies* triumphs because it’s so much damn fun.

Right up until its final moments, the film stays unpredictable, with plenty of twists that build to a truly inspired conclusion. **Leila Latif**



“Well, I think it makes you look very stylish.”



"Nobody move! I've lost a contact lens."

THE FEAST

Nature girl



► **RELEASED** 19 AUGUST

2022 | 18 | 93 minutes

► Director Lee Haven Jones

► Cast Annes Elwy, Nia Roberts, Julian Lewis Jones, Steffan Cennydd

► **This Welsh-language art horror** – the debut feature from television director Lee Haven Jones – mixes the slow burn scares of Karyn Kusama's *The Invitation* with folklore and social satire, to fairly impressive effect.

Young Cadi (Annes Elwy) has been hired to help serve at a dinner party in rural Wales. It's a swanky do hosted by wealthy – and sleazy – politician Gwyn (Julian Lewis Jones) and his wife Glenda (Nia Roberts). The couple are hoping to charm a neighbour into a lucrative business proposition, but they're so preoccupied with themselves that

they fail to notice just how quiet and distant Cadi is – until things take a very dark turn.

Jones and cinematographer Bjørn Ståle Bratberg eke maximum tension from their central location – a sleek, modernist building that feels more like a prison than a home – and an unhurried pace that will sorely test the patience of some viewers.

It's worth sticking with, though, for the brooding atmosphere and for the bloody, psychedelic and mesmerisingly strange final act, which brings the supernatural elements viscerally to the fore. Throughout it all Elwy impresses as Cadi, a literal force of nature moving amongst the venal, money-grabbing humans.

Will Salmon

i Haven Jones helmed three episodes of *Doctor Who*: "Spyfall: Part Two", "Orphan 55" and "Revolution Of The Daleks".

DC LEAGUE OF SUPER-PETS

Animal Firm



► **RELEASED** OUT NOW!

PG | 105 minutes

► Director Jared Stern

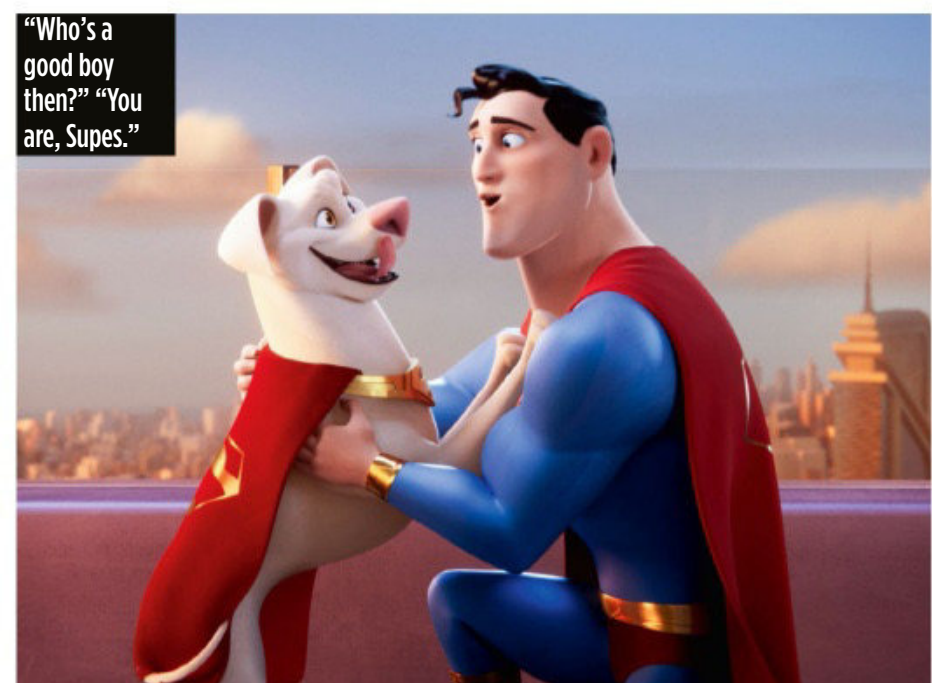
► Cast Dwayne Johnson, Kevin Hart, John Krasinski, Keanu Reeves

► **The Legion of Super-Pets** from which this animation emanates was a '60s team of bestial crime-fighters whose members included Comet the Superhorse, Streaky the Supercat and Beppo the Supermonkey. Given the possibilities that line-up offers, it's disappointing that Jared Stern's film largely restricts itself to a pair of pooches: Superman's loyal mutt Krypto, bullishly voiced by Dwayne Johnson, and Bat-Hound-in-waiting Ace,

irksomely played by his *Jumanji* co-star Kevin Hart.

A pig, a turtle and a jittery squirrel also find themselves endowed with superpowers by a chunk of orange Kryptonite that evil hairless guinea pig Lulu (Kate McKinnon) intends to use against the two-legged members of the Justice League. Mostly, however, *DC League Of Super-Pets* operates as a canine buddy film, with loner Ace and cocky Krypto learning to set aside their differences (à la Buzz and Woody) in aid of the greater good.

Pixar charm is, alas, in distinctly short supply in a frenetic caper that, from Green Lantern and The Flash cameos to a post-credits *Black Adam* tie-in, seems less a



child-friendly spin-off than a cynical exercise in brand extension. Action set-pieces involving a rocket-firing kitten and Lulu's Caviidae accomplices have a madcap zip, while John Krasinski and Keanu Reeves have fun spoofing square-jawed Supes and brooding Batman respectively.

When you consider how creatively Marvel has adopted the

animated format with the likes of *Into The Spider-Verse* and *What If...?*, though, you can't help feeling that, stirring Steve Jablonsky score notwithstanding, this mangy DC effort deserves to be sent to the doghouse.

Neil Smith

i Krypto debuted in *Adventure Comics* 210 (1955), in which Superboy learns that Jor-El sent him into space in a rocket.



"Spock, could you look at the cam – oh, never mind."

DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

Ethan Peck gives a pitch-perfect, Nimoy-aping delivery of "sens-ors".

An angst-ridden La'an reveals another hitherto unknown fact about the Gorn.

We enter a scene and Pike is cooking up something delicious.



Nurse Chapel flirts with Spock, then feels a bit sad.

Pike obsessively googles the cadets that he's destined to save.

Pike says "Hit it!" and the Enterprise goes to warp.

STAR TREK: STRANGE NEW WORLDS

The Enterprise Incidents



UK/US Paramount+, streaming now

► Showrunners Akiva Goldsman, Henry Alonso Myers

► Cast Anson Mount, Ethan Peck, Rebecca Romijn, Christina Chong, Babs Olusanmokin, Jess Bush

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 *Strange New*

Worlds is the best first season of live-action *Star Trek* since the original run in 1965. A bold claim, but all of the previous spin-offs have taken a while – usually three years – to find their feet. *Strange New Worlds* arrives with a remarkable sense of its own identity. Like the show's lead, Christopher Pike (Anson Mount), it has a swagger and a reassuring charm that immediately lets you know that you're in safe hands.

Pike is having a hard time following the end of *Discovery*'s second season (you can tell he's depressed because he's grown a big beard). Thanks to a vision of the future, he knows that in a few years he will save the lives of four Starfleet cadets, but at a terrible personal cost. Still, he's a man of duty and when Starfleet calls him back to active service, he gets out the clippers and returns to the Enterprise bridge alongside Spock (Ethan Peck), Number One (Rebecca Romijn) and a cast of new characters.

Despite spinning off from two previous shows, *Strange New Worlds* is refreshingly light on backstory and almost entirely episodic in nature. Character arcs continue and a couple of Big Bads

are set up (one of whom will draw incredulous chuckles from long-term fans), but these are all self-contained stories of the type that used to be *Trek*'s bread and butter. There's a planet with a dark secret, a tense starship duel, an unashamed *Aliens* rip-off and an old-fashioned ethical dilemma. There's even – in the one lousy instalment – a fairy-tale-comes-to-life yarn that feels like a riff on *TNG*'s Holodeck episodes.

But while the stories have a retro feel, the series' nuanced characterisation allows it to sit happily alongside more contemporary shows. Pike is as swashbuckling as Kirk and as thoughtful as Picard, but with a quiet melancholy. Peck grows more impressive by the week,

referencing Leonard Nimoy's performance while adding a touch of youthful vulnerability. Christina Chong and Babs Olusanmokin give more grounded performances as La'an and Dr M'Benga than we're used to on modern *Trek*, and the show is pleasingly free of endless heart-to-hearts.

It's hard to join the dots between Jess Bush's sparky, funny Nurse Chapel and the distant performance given by Majel Barrett. And a few characters are a little underwritten. Still, this is only season one and it's great. Imagine what it's going to be like when we get to year three...

Will Salmon

i Dr M'Benga appeared in two '60s episodes ("A Private Little War" and "That Which Survives"), played by Booker Bradshaw.

PAPER GIRLS Season One

Future imperfect



UK/US Streaming now, Prime Video

Showrunner Christopher C Rogers

Cast Riley Lai Nelet, Sofia Rosinsky, Fina Strazza, Camryn Jones

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **Given Stranger**

Things' phenomenal success, the only surprise is that it's taken a while for Brian K Vaughn's 2015 comic – potentially the perfect vehicle for BMX nostalgia, *ALF* references and New Order needle-drops – to come to TV. Now it finally has, the results are just a little underwhelming.

The essentials are the same, with 12-year-old Cleveland papergirls Erin, Mack, KJ and Tiffany transported from 1988 into the future, after getting caught up in a conflict between time-travelling factions. Thereafter, the TV series largely takes its own path. Much of the comic's

weirdness has been boiled away. There are no kaiju-sized tardigrades, for example, or giant Pteranodons used as flying steeds – though the CG budget does stretch to a mecha punch-up and one medium-sized dino.

The emphasis is rather different here: firmly on the brain-bending emotional impact of finding out what your future holds, or meeting your older self. This entails some additional sob stories. In the comic, for example, future-Erin is pretty cool; here, she's an anxiety-ridden martyr.

This aspect works well, thanks to excellent performances by the young leads. Scenes where the tweens are faced with home truths every adult has to contend with – maybe you *won't* achieve your dreams... and maybe they were ill-conceived anyway – should strike a chord with any grown-up



"Does this mean I... *don't* wear denim in the future?!"

whose path has featured some wrong turns.

After a while, you begin to wish the series would hurry up to the next encounter between past and future selves. The regularly sidelined temporal war arc isn't all that engaging. The production design also disappoints: pretty much everything, from the armour of the status quo-protecting Old Guard

to the facial deformities of the rebellious STF operatives, feels somehow diluted.

None of which bodes well for the second season. With all the future selves now introduced, it won't be able to fall back on those emotionally resonant one-to-ones.

Ian Berriman

i In the original comic, the physical appearance of the older Erin is based on artist Cliff Chiang's wife, Jenny.

MS MARVEL

Jersey Girl



UK/US Disney+, streaming now

Director Bisha K Ali

Cast Iman Vellani, Matt Lentz, Zenobia Shroff, Yasmeen Fletcher

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 **When comic** characters make their screen debuts, expectations are often sky-high – especially when the character is as beloved as Marvel's Kamala Khan, the Pakistani-American Muslim teenager who becomes the super-powered protector of New Jersey's Jersey City.

The good news is that there's a lot this Disney+ series gets right, most notably in the casting of Iman Vellani. Perfectly capturing Kamala's geeky enthusiasm and massive heart, Vellani is a delight in every scene, and is backed up by a strong supporting cast.

Executed with heaps of visual

energy, it also does a faithful job of building Kamala's world. Her school friends, her vibrant family life and her connections to her local mosque are all portrayed with realism and charm.

There are also alterations from the comics, and while some are obvious (like making Kamala's powers easier to realise with CG), the show is often very different in tone, most notably when it comes

“Executed with heaps of visual energy”

to Kamala's radical new origins.

Linking her powers to the history of India's Partition gives the story some extremely powerful sequences – but shifting between a teen superhero romp and an emotive exploration of



"That's nice, dear, are you that spidery man?"

generational trauma means this often feels like two completely different shows welded together.

A strong villain could have helped balance out both these abrupt gear-changes and some pacing issues. Unfortunately the adversaries feel like off-cuts from a lower-tier *Agents of SHIELD* episode. The result is that despite having one of the best debut episodes of any Disney+ Marvel

show, *Ms Marvel* ends up lagging behind more focused efforts like *Wandavision* and *Hawkeye*.

However, it's still a bright, engaging and characterful ride that sets up lots of potential for Kamala's upcoming movie debut in 2023's *The Marvels*.

Saxon Bullock

i Because Disney+ isn't currently available in Pakistan, *Ms Marvel* had a three-part cinematic release there in June/July.

THE SANDMAN

Dream weaver



UK/US Netflix, streaming now

► Showrunner **Allan Heinberg**

► Cast **Tom Sturridge, Gwendoline**

Christie, Jenna Coleman, Kirby

Howell-Baptiste

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 **Adapting *The***

Sandman for the big screen was never really a viable option. Neil Gaiman's comics masterpiece is a panoply of tales within tales anchored by a protagonist who doesn't always bother to turn up in any given issue. You simply can't do it justice in a two-hour movie.

And so to Netflix's much-anticipated, often deeply peculiar TV adaptation. With Gaiman's direct involvement and the time and freedom afforded by streaming, it's clear that this show has been made with a real love for the original material and a desire

to fit everything in – for better and for worse.

It's 1916 and occultist Roderick Burgess is attempting a ritual intended to summon Death (Kirby Howell-Baptiste) to our plane of reality. It goes wrong and he ends up, instead, with her brother Morpheus (Tom Sturridge). Too afraid to let him go, Burgess imprisons the Dream Lord on Earth for a century, with dire consequences for humanity. When Morpheus does finally escape, he must embark on a quest to recover his totems of power. Meanwhile, a living nightmare called the Corinthian is wreaking havoc in the waking world.

Tom Sturridge effortlessly embodies Morpheus, bringing both aristocratic disdain and a touching vulnerability to this immortal being. His command of

the character's voice, especially, is eerily on point – just hear him speak and it's suddenly impossible to imagine anyone else saying those lines.

The entire cast is strong, particularly Howell-Baptiste's charming, comforting Death and David Thewlis as the deranged John Dee, a much scarier (and also far more empathetic) villain than Big Bad the Corinthian.

And while you can sometimes tell that the budget is being stretched to breaking point, otherworldly locations like the Dreaming and Hell are evocatively realised, while CG convincingly brings characters like Merv Pumpkinhead (voiced by Mark Hamill, no less) to life.

Still, some elements that worked well on the page don't translate easily to the television screen. Take episode six, "The Sound Of Her Wings", based on one of the comic's best issues. This could and should have been a melancholy but ultimately

“It's clear this has been made with a real love for the original material”

uplifting exploration of mortality, as Dream gets to see humanity through his sister's eyes. Instead, the show crushes all of that into a scant 20 minutes before changing into an adaptation of "Men Of Good Fortune". There's a sort of thematic sense in that, but it's such a sudden, bizarre shift that it undermines the emotional heft of two classic stories.

Still, for all its weird choices and tonal swerves, it's hard not to root for *The Sandman*. There's genuinely nothing else like it on TV, and there's considerable charm in its grandiose, gothic oddness. Fans will likely love it, but will it connect with a wide enough audience to be awarded a second season? We can dream.

Will Salmon

i More than 200 actors read for the role of Morpheus, before the relatively unknown Tom Sturridge was cast in the role.



STRANGER THINGS Season Four, Volume Two



UK/US Netflix, streaming now

► Showrunners **The Duffer Brothers**

► Cast **Millie Bobby Brown, Winona**

Ryder, Gaten Matarazzo, Sadie Sink

EPISODES 4.08-4.09 **One of the** enduring clichés of genre TV coverage is showrunners boasting, "Every episode is like a mini-movie!" Usually that's a bit a stretch. Until now the epic battle episodes of *Game Of Thrones* have come closest. But the last two episodes of *Stranger Things* season four truly feel cinematic. It's not just the intense action, the effects and the emotional stakes involved. Look at those running times: 85 minutes and 150 minutes. In total, that's longer than *Titanic*.

The danger, of course, is self-indulgence, especially as there's not actually much in the way of plot. These episodes are 75% final confrontation, and 25% set-up for season five. There are few surprises (even the "shock" deaths are pretty much a given at this stage in a show's life), just plans being actioned, with a few extra-jeopardy bumps in the road along the way.

However, it rarely drags, with the three parallel storylines dovetailing masterfully. All the characters have moments to shine. The big set-pieces all hit the bullseye. And the signature *Stranger Things* wit and self-parody keep things feeling fresh. This is a show playing to its strengths and revelling in having the time and budget to do so.

Dave Golder



"People keep shouting 'Oi, Robert Smith!' Dunno why."

THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH Season One

As The World Falls Down



UK Paramount+, Wednesdays

US Showtime, streaming now

Showrunners Alex Kurtzman, Jenny Lumet

Cast Chiwetel Ejiofor, Naomie Harris, Bill Nighy, Jimmi Simpson

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 There's a very obvious – and obviously unavoidable – David Bowie-shaped hole at the heart of this sequel to Nicolas Roeg's 1976 arthouse SF masterpiece. The starman's performance as alien-among-us Thomas Jerome Newton remains so iconic and so apt that the thought of another actor donning his sunglasses feels instantly futile.

It makes sense, then, that this series focuses instead on a different extraterrestrial visitor. Faraday (a superb Chiwetel Ejiofor) has arrived on Earth to resume Newton's mission to supply water to the dying planet of Anthea and to find out what really became of his predecessor – here played by Bill Nighy.

The showrunners can't help but keep reminding you that the person you really want to see is no longer with us, though. All the episodes are named after Bowie songs. There are visual references, and lyrics are dropped clumsily into the dialogue. And when Faraday stutters that he's going through some "ch-ch-changes" it's



"And I'm saying Heathen was pretty good."

hard not to chuck a drink at your TV.

Such distractions draw constant, unfavourable comparisons with the original, rather than allowing the show to be its own thing, à la HBO's excellent reinvention of *Watchmen*. That's a shame, as there is some good stuff here. The series looks great, the cast is strong, and the environmental

themes feel more relevant now than ever.

It never quite coheres though, with muddled storytelling and a plot that feels stretched too thin over 10 hour-long episodes. It's not bad, but when you're following up a classic, that's not really good enough. **Will Salmon**

i David Bowie penned his own sequel, the 2015 stage musical *Lazarus*, which follows Newton later in life in New York.

RESIDENT EVIL Season One

Zero point



UK/US Netflix, streaming now

Showrunner Andrew Dabb

Cast Ella Balinska, Tamara Smart, Siena Agudong, Lance Reddick

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **Andrew** Dabb, former showrunner of *Supernatural*, takes the wheel of Netflix's live-action *Resident Evil* series and crashes it into a ditch. Perhaps Dabb wanted to avoid comparisons with *The Walking Dead*, but pushing the zombies (here called "zeroes") completely into the background in a zombie franchise seems perverse.

The story flips between 2022 and 2036. In the former, the Wesker family, Albert (Lance Riddick) and his daughters Jade

(Tamara Smart) and Billie (Siena Agudong), arrive in New Raccoon City, where the girls suspect dark deeds afoot at the Umbrella Corporation research facility that employs their father. In 2036, the adult Jade (Ella Balinska) is a scientist on the run from Umbrella's agents while researching the T-virus that has overrun the planet.

The show is burdened with stilted dialogue, unlikeable characters and contrived plotting. Siena Agudong appears to model her entire performance as Billie on Billie Eilish, and while Lance Reddick brings more gravitas to the material than it merits, the scene where Albert looks like he's doing a Blade cosplay is



"Oh sorry, wrong room. Er, I'll leave you to it."

unintentionally hilarious. Jade is a challenging protagonist, turning from an aggressive, self-centred teen to an adult who brings death to everyone she meets. The only person the teenage Jade tolerates is Simon (Conor Gosatti), a walking plot device who exists to hack into Umbrella's implausible security to keep the story moving.

The horror lacks impact. Featured set-pieces include a giant

caterpillar, giant spider and giant crocodile, but there's no sense of dread or terror – and the musical choices are heavy-handed. The ending sets the stage for season two, but this could well suffer the same fate as Netflix's *Cowboy Bebop*. Come back, Paul WS Anderson, all is forgiven. **David West**

i In episode four, as Jade's hiding from zeroes, a typewriter – used to save progress in the games – is seen on a table.



The ink-on-the-binoculars prank made her livid.

PREY

It's good to stalk



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2022 | 9+ | SVOD

▶ Director **Dan Trachtenberg**

▶ Cast **Amber Midthunder, Dakota Beavers, Stormee Kipp, Dane DiDiegro**

DISNEY+ “This is as far as you go. No more. This is it!” That, according to young Comanche warrior Taabe (Dakota Beavers), is what should be declared proudly whenever one is confronted by a seemingly unbeatable foe. It is a sentiment hunter Naru (Amber Midthunder) takes to heart when she realises that the Northern Great Plains she and her tribe call home have been invaded by more than one sinister interloper.

Yet it is also one that speaks for *Predator* fans who, after one

sequel, two reboots and a pair of *Alien* crossovers, may have given up hope of any successor living up to John McTiernan’s 1987 original.

Dan Trachtenberg’s *Prey* isn’t a match for that film either. But it’s at least a step in the right direction, one that cleaves close to established franchise lore while simultaneously making a purposeful stride into hitherto uncharted territory. That territory is the past: the America of the 18th

“In Amber Midthunder, it has a resourceful and dynamic heroine”

century to be exact, an unspoilt wilderness both cherished by its Native inhabitants and at risk from colonial plunderers. When an alien arrives and starts slicing its way up the food chain, however, it’ll take more than a tomahawk to stop it.

Or a musket for that matter, with the primitive firearms wielded by the rapacious French trappers who briefly take Naru prisoner offering little defence against the Predator’s extra-terrestrial arsenal. A detachable lance, a constricting net and levitating mines are among its weapons of choice.

Like Arnold’s Dutch before her, though, Naru has guile and smarts on her side, not to mention a knowledge of local flora that proves indispensable. That’s all she and Trachtenberg need to set up a tense climactic face-off that, if not quite on a par with the first film’s, still ensures things conclude on a satisfying high.

Whether gutting a wolf, slaughtering a bear or making

short work of both Indigenous and European assailants, this pic’s Predator (Dane DiDiegro) is one lethal melonfarmer. Die-hards, though, will be discomfited by its appearance, with Trachtenberg seeing fit to adorn it with a skull-like helmet, yawning mandibles and sunken eyes that rob it of personality.

Even the dreadlocks have been given a make-over, resulting in a Predator that seems less like Kevin Peter Hall’s iconic space Rasta than an *Alien: Resurrection* hybrid. Not for the first time with this property, you’re left wondering why they didn’t leave well alone.

However, *Prey* should be applauded for the clarity of its concept and the leanness of its execution. In Midthunder, meanwhile, it has a resourceful and dynamic heroine who deserves a place in the pantheon beside Sonny Landham’s Billy Sole. **Neil Smith**

i *Prey* is also available dubbed in Comanche – a first for a new release (though a Navajo dub of *Star Wars* came out in 2013).



GREEN LANTERN: BEWARE MY POWER

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2022 | 15 | Blu-ray/DVD/download

▶ Director Jeff Wamester

▶ Cast Aldis Hodge, Jimmi Simpson, Nolan North, Brian Bloom

➤ **Of all the DC characters,** Green Lantern is an obvious choice for animation, and the latest DC Universe movie has a decent stab at creating a new jumping-on point.

In this case, instead of the protagonist being traditional Justice League member Hal Jordan, it's ex-soldier John Stewart, whose life is up-ended when a dying alien bequeaths him a green power ring that makes him the only surviving member of the Green Lantern Corps. Teaming up with Green Arrow to discover what happened to the Corps, Stewart sets out on a dangerous journey into space, and the adventure that follows is visually a step above the usual DC animations, thanks to impressive design and dynamic direction.

It's just a pity not as much effort was spent on the embarrassingly flat script, or the mostly lacklustre performances, with only *Westworld*'s Jimmi Simpson and veteran voice actor Nolan North bringing any real energy. There's a handful of enjoyable fight sequences, but otherwise this is for die-hard fans only.

➤ **Extras** An entertaining half-hour featurette on John Stewart's comic-book history as a Green Lantern, and two GL-centric episodes of the 2001–4 *Justice League* animated show. **Saxon Bullock**



The chap on the right doesn't have the foggiest.

CREATURES THE WORLD FORGOT

Cave art

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1971 | 18 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Don Chaffey

▶ Cast Julie Ege, Brian O'Shaughnessy, Tony Bonner, Rosalie Crutchley

BLU-RAY DEBUT *Creatures The Film*

Forgot is the easy gag: following such monster-loaded Hammer epics as *One Million Years BC* and *When Dinosaurs Ruled The Earth*, the lack of prehistoric beasts in a movie whose title explicitly trades on their marquee value feels cheeky to say the least.

But that's unfair on this Stone Age quest tale, a true outlier in the studio's output and one that feels, five decades on, courageously experimental. Entirely wordless – do paleolithic grunts count as dialogue? – it strives for realism in place of pulpy, history-twisting thrills, substituting porcupines, pythons and cave bears for Dyanation behemoths.

If it misses the magic of a Ray Harryhausen then it benefits from natural wonder: the location work

in Africa's Namib desert is absolutely stunning, a sand-blasted, boulder-strewn backdrop that sells this hard-edged survival story better than any anachronistic dino ever could.

➤ **Extras** Kim Newman and Sean Hogan supply an enjoyable commentary. Jonathan Rigby presents a genuinely fascinating account of the film's origins as a free-floating title for which Hammer sought not just a story but a genre (25 minutes). Rachel Knightley profiles Norwegian star Julie Ege (seven minutes). David Huckvale unpicks the score by prolific Italian composer Mario Nascimbene (26 minutes).

There's also a chance to see director Don Chaffey's trio of Children's Film Foundation shorts from 1953: *Skid Kids* (49 minutes), *A Good Pull Up* (18 minutes) and *Watch Out!* (18 minutes). Plus: image gallery; trailer; an 80-page booklet. **Nick Setchfield**

i Julie Ege turned down the lead female role (ultimately played by Martine Beswick) in Hammer's *Dr Jekyll and Sister Hyde*.



BEWARE MY BRETHREN

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1972 | 15 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Robert Hartford-Davis

▶ Cast Ann Todd, Tony Beckley, Patrick Magee, Suzanna Leigh

BLU-RAY DEBUT Released as *The*

Fiend in the UK, the Stateside title of this British horror better captures its spirit of happy-clappy, tambourine-shaking terror. Tony Beckley is the disturbed young man balancing a misogynistic killing spree with dutiful attendance at an evangelical church.

There are shades of *Psycho* in the quasi-incestuous relationship with his overbearing mother – a chilly, off-kilter Ann Todd – and more than a touch of *Peeping Tom* in his habit of taping the frenzied murders. It's a seedy watch, set in what feels like the ashtray of the early '70s, but some impressively edited sequences crank up the intensity, while a gloriously funky score keeps the adrenaline flowing even as the plotting sags.

➤ **Extras** There's a choice of audio commentaries from author Troy Howarth and Samm Deighan, associate editor of *Diabolique* magazine. The BFI's Vic Pratt recaps the filmography of helmer Hartford-Davis (23 minutes), while film historian Melanie Williams makes the case that star Ann Todd is an unjustly forgotten figure in British history (17 minutes). There's also a fascinating side-by-side comparison of the UK cinema release and the uncut international version (six minutes). Plus: trailer; booklet.

Nick Setchfield

ALAMY

UNIVERSAL TERROR

Three servings of Special K

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1937-1952 | PG | Blu-ray

▶ Directors Lloyd Corrigan, George

Wagner, Nathan H Juran

▶ Cast Boris Karloff, Jean Rogers,

Susanna Foster, Richard Greene

BLU-RAY DEBUT As **Frankenstein's** creation, Boris Karloff became the corpse-stitched frontman of Universal's horror empire. But beyond that enduring icon the former William Henry Pratt was a dependable, chameleonic part of the studio's output, guaranteed to add a dignified shiver to production line thrillers.

Top-billed in *Night Key* (1937), he's a sympathetic figure, the genial inventor of a cutting-edge security system who finds himself ripped off by a business associate. The ensuing battle of wits is low

on suspense – the identity of “the mysterious Night Key” is never in question – but it's a briskly entertaining cops 'n' mobsters tale with glorious period hardware (dials! Switchboards! Tickertape!) and a tangible Depression-era atmosphere. Far from this box set's “terror” remit, inarguably, but some animated electrical effects give it a faint pulp SF vibe, alongside the welcome presence of Jean Rogers, Dale in the *Flash Gordon* serials.

Karloff is infinitely more sinister in *The Climax* (1944), a gaslit melodrama where the potential chills are defused by sumptuous shades of Technicolor. Originally intended as a sequel to 1943's *Phantom Of The Opera*, it's a grandly staged quasi-musical that makes effective use of its star's immaculate sense of menace amid

the chocolate box romance of it all. A memorably lurid scene where Karloff visits the embalmed remains of his victim, mounted on a tomb in a secret velvet room, teases the gothic possibilities the rest of the film rather squanders.

From howling wolves to lightning-blasted turrets to creaking doors to wind-tossed cemetery leaves, *The Black Castle* (1952) leaves no trope unexhumed – and that's just the opening moments. A breathless, infectiously enjoyable mix of Edgar Allan Poe and *The Prisoner Of Zenda*, it finds the permanently dashing Richard Greene – Robin Hood in the '50s TV show – clashing blades with Stephen McNally's nefarious Count. In truth Karloff's a supporting player here, and even those tombstone features are eclipsed by such delights as a spot of leopard-wrestling or a dungeon filled with crocodiles. “Mysterious passages,” says Greene's swashbuckling hero. “I can't resist them!” Who can?

▶ **Extras** You feel the lack of dedicated featurettes, but background information is amply supplied by a posse of film experts: Kevin Lyons and Jonathan Rigby provide commentaries for *Night Key* and *The Climax*, while Kim Newman and Stephen Jones accompany *The Black Castle*.

Each movie comes with its original trailer plus twin photo galleries, one dedicated to production stills, the other showcasing some ravishing vintage promo art, complete with shameless, truth-bending hucksterism: “Death in a wax museum!” cries the poster for *Night Key*, a film with a conspicuous lack of wax, a museum or, indeed, much in the way of death. A booklet includes new writing by Karloff biographer Stephen Jacobs. **Nick Setchfield**

i *The Climax's* Susanna Foster also played heroine Christine in Universal's 1943 remake of *The Phantom Of The Opera*.



WICKED WORLD

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 15 AUGUST**

1991 | 18 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Barry J Gillis

▶ Cast Eddie Platt, Barry J Gillis,

Maria Delgado, Kelly Felhaber

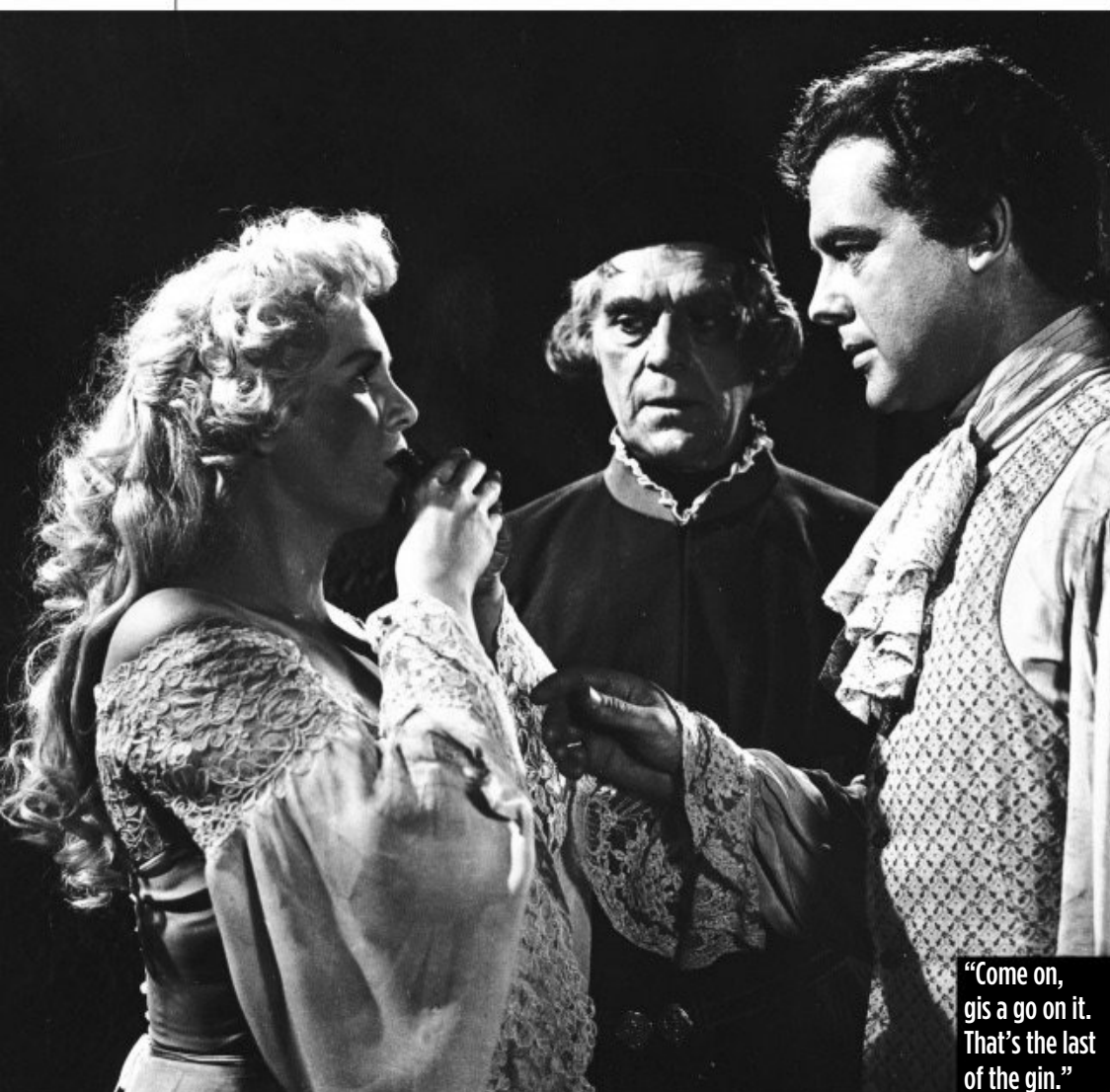
BLU-RAY DEBUT **How to even**

begin to describe the experience of watching this latest entry in the American Genre Film Archive range? It's a work so truly bizarre that it transcends all conventional notions of good or bad filmmaking and leaves you feeling instead like you've just witnessed a particularly unhinged piece of outsider performance art.

There's no real plot – a man (Eddie Platt) walks about killing people – yet it somehow manages to be wildly convoluted. The dialogue (seemingly entirely overdubbed) rarely matches up with the on-screen action, and the editing is liable to bring on a seizure. Don't believe us? Watch the trailer and immediately book yourself into a hospital.

This demented opus is the work of actor/director Barry J Gillis, who, if nothing else, has surely made the best film with an on-screen thanks to the Miss Nude Canada pageant.

▶ **Extras** A director's cut adds another minute of madness. “Reality” (60 minutes) is a collection of behind-the-scenes footage; “I do know what I'm doing, or whatever,” Gillis reassures us. “Tomorrow's Dream” (24 minutes) provides insights into the film and Gillis's other projects. Eddie Platt's son offers a tribute to his father (two minutes). There's also a director's commentary, a trailer and a music video. **Will Salmon**



“Come on, gis a go on it. That's the last of the gin.”



LUCK In for a penny



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2022 | G | SVOD

▶ Director **Peggy Holmes**

▶ Cast **Eva Noblezada, Simon Pegg, Jane Fonda, Flula Borg**

APPLE TV+ **Teenager Sam** (Eva Noblezada) has horrifically bad luck. This finally changes when she finds a lucky penny... but after promptly losing it (of course), she embarks on a desperate mission to find it again so that she can help a friend. This involves teaming up with the penny's owner – a talking black cat named Bob (Simon Pegg) – and searching his magical world. This will be tricky, as Sam is human and her bad luck isn't welcome there.

There's a big problem with Skydance Studios' debut movie, and we're not just talking about the involvement of disgraced

former Disney bigwig John Lasseter (whose presence caused Emma Thompson to leave the cast – she's replaced by Jane Fonda, who voices a rather excellent dragon). It's that what should be a simple story requires an almost Stephen Hawking level of brainpower to untangle: Sam's search becomes a cascade of nonsensical quests involving vast machines, word-vomit exposition and insanely complicated worldbuilding.

Adults will be left scratching their heads at how unnecessary it all is, but at least kids can enjoy Pegg's characteristically likeable feline, an army of cute bunnies and some depressingly clichéd, but very perky, leprechauns.

Jayne Nelson

i After a 1233 Papal decree, so many "unlucky" black cats were killed in Europe that rats ran wild, aiding the Black Death.



WHEN I CONSUME YOU



▶ **RELEASED 16 AUGUST**
2022 | TBC | VOD

▶ **A soul-eating demon** pushes a sad former addict to suicide, then switches his attentions to her even sadder anxiety-ridden brother in this low-fi psychological horror.

No prizes for teasing out that metaphor, then. But there's an endearing roughness to the cinematography and a sweet vulnerability performance-wise that makes it less crass than the stacks of other trauma-as-monster movies. It even finds a tiny sliver of light, ending on an optimistic note. **Sarah Dobbs**



HELL HIGH



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1989 | 18 | Blu-ray

▶ **In this witless *Porky's*/*Last House On The Left* mash-up**, high school kids terrorise a teacher by slinging swamp mud at her house. This triggers memories of trauma, with murderous results...

The fact that the prank slips into sexual assault seems doubly crass given the film's fondness for crowd-pleasing flashes of tit. Lacking tension, logic, or decent gore, its one draw is a young Christopher Cousins, later of *Breaking Bad*.

▶ **Extras** Three commentaries, five interviews; location tour; deleted scene; more. **Ian Berriman**



GOOD MADAM



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2022 | TBC | SVOD

SHUDDER **Expect numerous** ominous shots of tumbling laundry and boiling water in this slow-burn, Xhosa-language horror, shot in Cape Town. It's textbook "elevated" fare.

Tsidi takes her daughter to stay with grandma – long-time faithful servant to a bedridden white woman. Is she under a spell, or is Tsidi just paranoid?

Xhosa singing and the way the film engages with the legacy of apartheid hold some interest. But one brief gruesome vision is scant reward for enduring all the non-diegetic wind howl and creeping camera. **Calvin Baxter**



MUNSTER, GO HOME



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1966 | U | Blu-ray

BLU-RAY DEBUT **The Munsters** reveal green skin in this Technicolor outing. Mostly it's business as usual: Fred Gwynne mugging; bad-is-good reversals; Joe Public reacting with horror.

When Herman inherits an English manor, Terry-Thomas's rotter cousin is champing at the bit to eliminate him. The UK setting freshens things up, and a climactic road race has *Wacky Races* appeal. Like most sitcom movies, it feels over-extended, but it has a corny charm.

▶ **Extras** Trailer. **Ian Berriman**

DOG SOLDIERS

Gunning with wolves



★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED** 22 AUGUST

2002 | 15 | Blu-ray (4K/standard)

▶ Director Neil Marshall

▶ Cast Sean Pertwee, Kevin McKidd, Emma Cleasby, Liam Cunningham

➔ **Designed as post-pub viewing**, this British-as-fish-and-chips film is the apex of lad-horror.

It's a lairy affair, drenched in testosterone. Male relationships, with their bantz, football chat and earthy idioms, are centre stage, as troops on an exercise in the Highlands end up in a farmhouse, besieged by towering werewolves.

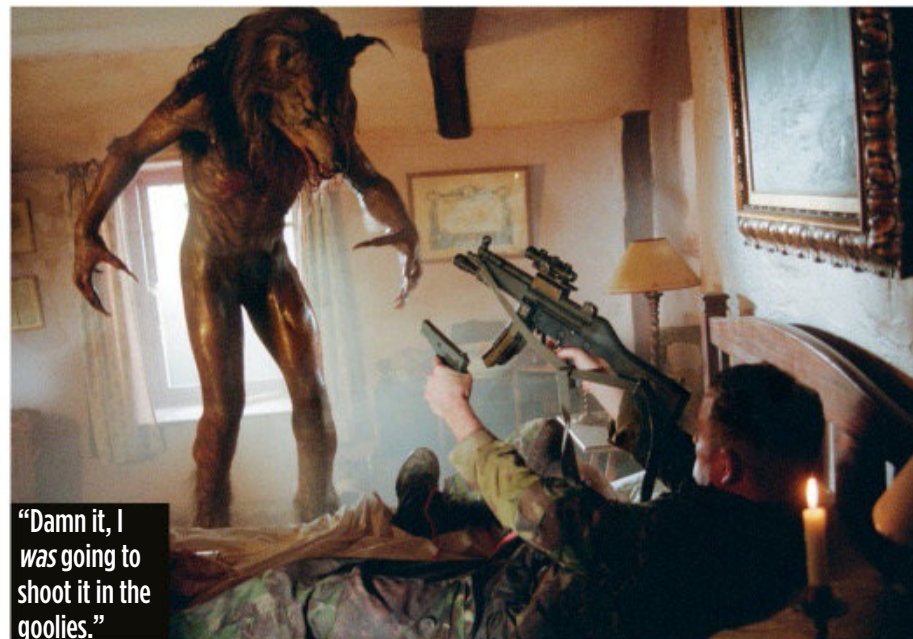
Neil Marshall's gripping, darkly witty debut moves through stages like an expert driver smoothly shifting gears. Jittery handheld creates a sense of urgency, revealing just the right amount of his dancers-on-stilts lycanthropes.

It's perfectly paced, with well-defined characters and neat twists; Marshall has yet to top it.

➔ **Extras** A 62-minute Making Of from a 2015 US release is the highlight. Featuring a host of cast and crew, it paints a picture of a very collaborative production; a 13-minute offcut sees the production designer talking us through a card model of the set.

A Marshall commentary also dates from 2015; a below-par one by two American producers, hails from the DVD. A fresh track by professor Alison Peirse switches between relating it to slashers, and

“Perfectly paced, with well-defined characters”



“Damn it, I was going to shoot it in the goolies.”

spelling out the (self-evident) function of scenes. A new career overview chat with Marshall (38 minutes) is amusingly candid (on *Hellboy*: “You can’t polish a turd.”). A talking head surveys werewolf movies (33 minutes); a video essay (23 minutes) separates out folklore and “fakelore”. Marshall’s 1999 short “Combat” (eight minutes) amusingly portrays a night at the pub like armed conflict.

Plus: seven minutes of deleted scenes (mostly more squaddie chat); nine outtakes (if you ever need a tea towel ripped in half, don’t call Kevin McKidd...); a gallery of behind-the-scenes snaps; trailers. The Limited Edition 4K comes bundled with an 108-page book and six art cards. **Ian Berriman**

i Geordie Neil Marshall has a proud local claim to fame – his grandfather designed Newcastle Brown Ale’s blue star logo.

FANTASTIC BEASTS: THE SECRETS OF DUMBLEDORE

I Wanna Be Selected

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED** OUT NOW!

2022 | 12 | Blu-ray (standard/4K)/DVD/download

▶ Director David Yates

▶ Cast Eddie Redmayne, Jude Law, Mads Mikkelsen, Callum Turner

➔ **The Harry Potter spin-off** prequel franchise chugs on to a third entry, which many figured would be *Fantastic Beasts And Newt’s Diminishing Returns*, but thanks to help from veteran *Potter* screenwriter Steve Kloves proves to be better than the first two.

Which isn’t saying too much. Yet, digging into the Grindelwald/Dumbledore connection (while hinting at the romance), it does at least focus the story, and sensibly puts the character workload on

Jude Law and Mads Mikkelsen, as Grindelwald plots to become the new Supreme Mugwump. Newt (Eddie Redmayne) and the beasts, despite the title, remain the weaker element, even as they’re drawn more into the main story this time around. You do have to wonder whether the studio can stretch this out for the original five-film plan though (which is looking more unlikely now).

➔ **Extras** A batch of scene-specific featurettes – “Erkstag Jailbreak”, “The Candidates’ Dinner”, “A Dumbledore Duel”, “Battle in Bhutan”, “German Ministry Of Magic” and “Newt In The Wild” (totalling 35 minutes) – are your standard mix of talking heads happiness and behind-the-scenes stuff, with a few interesting



Dumbledore invents the laser pointer. Well done.

nuggets (Mikkelsen’s dance background aided his duelling).

Mini-docs such as “The Dumbledore Family Tree” (nine minutes) and “Dumbledore Through The Ages” (seven minutes) are mostly for newcomers, while “Magical Or Muggle” (five minutes) tests the cast’s knowledge. There are also bits on the creatures (six minutes) and filming on the Hogwarts set

(six minutes), plus a promo for *The Cursed Child* (five minutes).

Seven minutes of deleted scenes add little, though one between Newt and brother Theseus (Callum Turner) does makes an argument for its restoration. Buy the DVD and you just get the Hogwarts piece. **James White**

i Newt’s first scene at Tianzi Mountain was going to be shot in China, but the pandemic forced a switch to the backlot.



WHAT JOSIAH SAW

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2022 | TBC | SVOD

▶ Director Vincent Grashaw

▶ Cast Robert Patrick, Nick Stahl, Scott Haze, Kelli Garner

SHUDDER Given the presence of Robert Patrick and Nick Stahl, one presumes the makers of this slice of Southern Gothic are *Terminator* fans, but we'd also bet on them owning a stack of Nick Cave LPs. The down-at-heel world it paints, with its squalid underclass lifestyles, all-pervading corruption, and talk of Biblical judgement, just has that vibe.

A mining company wants to buy the Graham family's Oklahoma farm. Accounts of the mother's suicide tease a potential haunting, but what eventually emerges is a tale of buried secrets and delusion.

Patrick makes the most of limited screen-time as monstrous patriarch Josiah, cruelly mocking son Tommy (Scott Haze, frustratingly mumbly). We must wait until chapters two and three to meet siblings Eli (Stahl) and Mary (Kelli Garner), and the fourth before a reunion finally brings the meaning of fragmentary flashbacks into focus.

The section centred on Eli, blackmailed into robbing a gypsy-run carnival to clear his gambling debts, is the highlight. It could be productively pulled out as a noir short. The film has much beautifully photographed gloom, a timeless feel (thanks in part to Shazam-proof doo-wop obscurities), and strong performances. But it's slow to get to the point, and horror fans may bridle at being tricked into swallowing an overused twist.

Ian Berriman



Mark was sad that he wasn't in the Ryan Gosling film.

DRIVE On the Wong track

★★★★★

EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 29 AUGUST**

1997 | 18 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Steve Wang

▶ Cast Mark Dacascos, Kadeem Hardison, John Pyper-Ferguson, Brittany Murphy

BLU-RAY DEBUT This direct-to-video actioner feels like a Hong Kong martial arts flick scripted by Shane Black.

Former Chinese agent Toby Wong (Mark Dacascos) has a "bio-engine" boosting his abilities. Now he wants out – and to sell the tech for millions. Goons are out to stop him. After saving the life of barfly Malik (Kadeem Hardison), Wong makes him act as his driver.

Presented here in the longer director's cut; it's essentially one long chase, with a mismatched duo bantering and bonding. Their interplay is clearly largely improvised, with plenty of Eddie Murphy-esque quips.

“Essentially one long chase, with a mismatched duo bonding”

Fights tend towards the outlandish: Wong vs goons on scrambler bikes; Wong vs goons with stun batons, wearing boots on his fists. The script crackles with chuckle-worthy one-liners ("That son of a bitch could eat flour and shit cupcakes!"). Background glimpses of a TV show about a giant frog with Einstein's brain (!) dial up the insanity. With the quirk level needle buried in the red zone, it's goofily charming fast food for the brain.

➕ **Extras** The director, two leads and the fight choreographer provide commentary; stunt doubles, CG and pick-up shots are pointed out, and there's lots of laughter. A 1997 Making Of (48 minutes) is very of its time: 4:3 ratio, with annoyingly up-front music; a gallery presents 16 brief offcuts (25 minutes). *Fast And The Furious's* Jason Tobin recalls his experiences as an extra (20 minutes). Six deleted scenes (eight minutes) provide more character moments. Plus: the original cut (trimmed by 18 minutes); trailer; A3 poster. **Ian Berriman**

i In the original script, the TV show was *Walter The Einstein Ape*. This was ruled out on the grounds of "animal abuse".

(4K X FOUR)

Fourth-billed Dwayne Johnson's been shunted to the front to flog the HD release of **DOOM** (out now). He's one of a team of Marines sent to a research facility on Mars to battle mutant creatures in this 2005 take on the videogame series. No new bonuses here, just six old featurettes. Warner's Ultimate Collector's Edition steelbook of **EDGE OF TOMORROW** (out now) just has a bunch of old DVD extras too. Tom Cruise's mash-up of alien invasion, *Groundhog Day* and *Saving Private Ryan* does come with two posters (the United



Defense Force recruitment ad may not get framed everywhere, given the acronym...), six art cards, and a booklet. Still seems a weak offer, given the eye-watering £40 price. You can also expect to fork out 40 smackers for **EVENT HORIZON** (out now), Paul WS Anderson's SF-horror about a rescue crew exploring a missing spaceship that's reappeared in orbit around Jupiter. Though the film celebrates its 25th anniversary this month, Paramount haven't pushed the boat out for this steelbook Collector's Edition – the extras again all date back to DVD, with no sign of the 11 interviews recorded for last year's US release. Physical goodies: a spaceship blueprint, a replica of the patches worn by the rescue crew, six art cards, and a pin badge. Finally, the Indy releases continue with Connery-starring Grail-quest **INDIANA JONES AND THE LAST CRUSADE** (15 August). The packaging is the only new thing about this Limited Edition – a steelbook, with mini-poster. All four also include an SD Blu-ray disc.

KILLER'S MOON

Lunatic free-range

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED** 29 AUGUST

1978 | 18 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Alan Birkinshaw

▶ Cast Anthony Forrest, Tom Marshal, Nigel Gregory, Jane Hayden

➔ **A product of the raw, nasty** tendency of British horror of the '70s, *Killer's Moon* is almost comical in its shameless titillation. It sees four escaped psychopaths, dosed with LSD as part of dream therapy (one is David Jackson, *Blake's 7*'s Gan), menacing a busload of clearly-far-older schoolgirls. Cue much ripping open of Victorian nightdresses and strangulation.

Though the killers repeatedly talk about how "It's only a dream", the high-concept is hard to swallow; a few psychedelic POV shots might have helped. And

owl-hoot sound effects can't disguise the day-for-night blue skies, or the studio-bound nature of some camping exteriors.

Remarkably, novelist Fay Weldon did a script polish (she's the director's half-sister), which may explain the escapees' oddly grandiloquent turn of phrase. That's one of several eccentricities, like a killer quipping "I should've gone private!", incidental cues riffing on nursery rhymes, and intrusions by a drippy ballad, which just about manage to render this seedy, shonky effort watchably peculiar.

“Owl sound effects can't disguise day-for-night blue skies”



Don't worry, some Daz will have that out in a jiffy.

➔ **Extras** 88 Films' bonus upgrades include a critical commentary by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, who argues, at length, that the film critiques "the systemic failure of broken patriarchal institutions" – a, er, rather grand claim. A career overview chat with director Alan Birkinshaw (56 minutes – 13 on *Killer's Moon*) has entertaining anecdotes about the likes of Oliver Reed and Donald Sutherland.

Actor Joanne Good (25 minutes) cheerfully pooh-poohs any idea that the cast were exploited ("It was so innocent!"), and seems sincerely disappointed that she didn't have a nude scene. A video essay (13 minutes) highlights the film's bizarre tone. Plus: trailers.

Ian Berriman

i According to actor Joanne Good, the girls' school uniforms were reused from *The Prime Of Miss Jean Brodie*.

FLATLINERS

A Matter Of Life And Death

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED** OUT NOW!

1990 | 15 | Blu-ray (4K/standard)

▶ Director Joel Schumacher

▶ Cast Kiefer Sutherland, Julia Roberts, Kevin Bacon, William Baldwin

➔ **Director Joel Schumacher** had a simple credo when it came to cinema: "No one pays for under the top." So this tale of med school students illicitly testing the boundaries of life receives the full MTV gothic treatment: more sinister religious statuary and billowing white sheets than Ultravox or Bonnie Tyler could ever dream of in their '80s pomp.

Stunningly photographed by Jan de Bont, the visuals threaten to dilute the chills. It's an improbably sumptuous film in places, summoning otherworldly visions that resemble everything

from an Imax documentary on icy mountainscapes to upmarket monochrome porn.

Ultimately there's more premise than plot, but the story's central confrontation with the frontiers of mortality still has a taboo-rattling power. And it's a bonus that the Gen X superstars in the cast are allowed to be messy, complicated souls as they reap their karmic paybacks in the name of science.

➔ **Extras** There's a personable, fact-crammed audio commentary by entertainment journalists Max Evry and Bryan Reesman, who have clearly done their prep. Elsewhere an impressive set of new interviews musters key

“Ultimately has more premise than plot”



"Pssst. Oi, mate. Yeah, you there. Got a light?"

creative talent: screenwriter Peter Filardi (19 minutes) reveals the story's surprising origins in the Iran Contra affair of the '80s; DOP Jan de Bont and chief lighting technician Edward Ayer (18 minutes) are particularly interesting on the influence of Rembrandt's "God light"; production designer Eugenio Zanetti and art director Larry Lundy (11 minutes) talk about the

importance of mythological imagery; while composer James Newton Howard and orchestrator Chris Boardman (11 minutes) discuss the score and costume designer Susan Becker (six minutes) talks us through the wardrobe choices. Plus: trailer, gallery, booklet. **Nick Setchfield**

i Schumacher dropped *The* from original title *The Flatliners*, as *The Lost Boys* taught him that "no one's going to say it anyway".



LIGHT & MAGIC

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2022 | TBC | SVOD

▶ Director Lawrence Kasdan

DISNEY+ Lawrence Kasdan's six-part Industrial Light & Magic doc is a spectacular celebration of the most famous visual effects house in the business. While, unsurprisingly, the original *Star Wars* trilogy dominates the first three episodes, the series deftly negotiates the company's evolution from master modelmakers to CG pioneers – ILM founder and early digital evangelist George Lucas emerges as something of a visionary in that regard.

Director Kasdan (writer of *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*) shows off the impressive names in his contacts book, as the likes of Steven Spielberg, James Cameron and Robert Zemeckis recall how ILM have repeatedly made the impossible possible. Crucially, however, Kasdan never forgets that the company's true stars are the unlikely assortment of visual effects wizards whose unique set of skills coalesced to form the perfect fusion of art, technology and ingenuity.

Plenty of the anecdotes will be familiar to fans of blockbuster cinema, but the calibre of the talking heads and the archive footage ensures it feels like a true glimpse behind the curtain. And while there's an undeniable sense that the show is telling the PR-friendly version of history, there are also some admirably candid recollections about fallings-out and departures. A wonderful ode to the company.

Richard Edwards



"May contain outdated cultural depictions."

RED SONJA

Low Nielsen rating

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1985 | 15 | Blu-ray (4K/standard)/DVD

▶ Director Richard Fleischer

▶ Cast Brigitte Nielsen, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sandahl Bergman, Paul L Smith

▶ **This is a weak entry in the '80s swords-and-sorcery canon**, despite the input of talents such as director Richard Fleischer (*Soylent Green*), composer Ennio Morricone (*The Good, The Bad And The Ugly*) and designer Danilo Donati (*Flash Gordon*).

It's set in the *Conan* universe. Brigitte Nielsen's rape survivor Sonja reluctantly partners with Arnold Schwarzenegger's Kalidor in a quest to overthrow evil Queen Gedren. This is the film's first 4K restoration, scanned from the original 35mm print, with dust and scratches manually removed, and it looks glorious. The rolling Italian countryside pings brightly

“The rolling Italian countryside pings brightly”

off the screen, and those Donati costumes are an ostentatious treat.

Alas, the story is awkward and uneven, and it's not helped by the stars' lack of chemistry. Far from empowering, Sonja's story feels exploitative (and homophobic).

▶ **Extras** Reading glasses ready, as little of this is in English. “Arnold Schwarzenegger: The Man Who Raised Hollywood” (16 minutes) is a mix of talking heads celebrating Arnie's star quality. “Red Sonja vs Kalidor: The Making Of A Misunderstanding” (12 minutes) sees assistant director Michel Ferry dropping some behind-the-scenes colour.

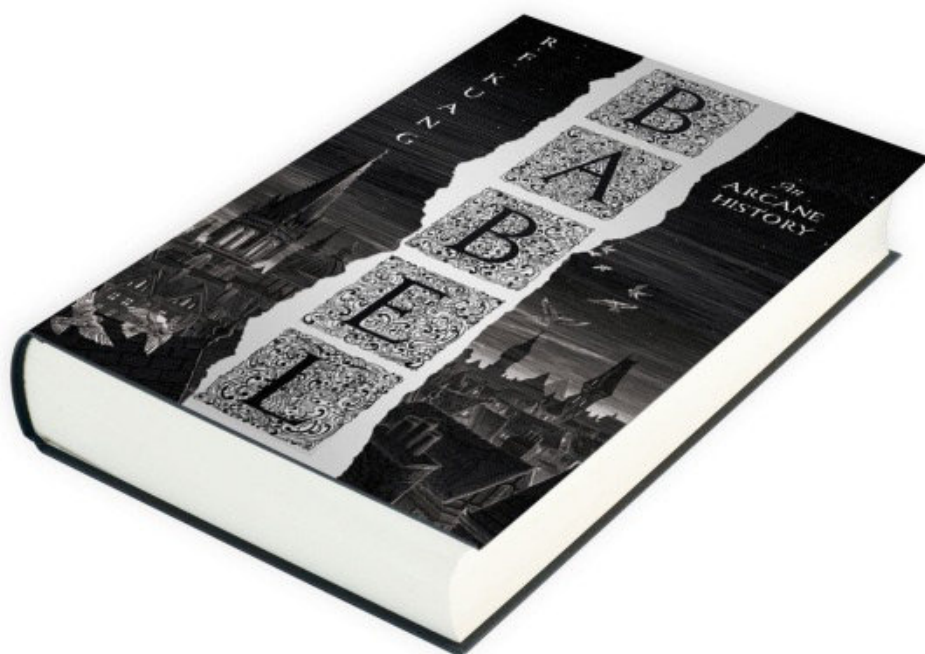
The diamond here, arguably worth the price of the whole disc, is “Renato Casaro – The Last Movie Painter” (97 minutes), an award-winning biopic of the popular poster artist. Interviewees include the likes of Aurelio De Laurentiis and Dario Argento, discussing Casaro's hyperrealist technique. It barely mentions *Red Sonja*, mind, though Casaro has painted new art for this release. Plus: a pair of trailers. **Dave Bradley**

i The original UK cinema release in 1985 cut 12 seconds – including a shot of a throwing star – to score a PG rating.

(ROUND UP)



Sega's spikey speedster returns in **SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 2** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD/download). This time Jim Carrey's Dr Robotnik has teamed-up with Knuckles (Idris Elba), a red echidna with fists the size of hams, to find the Master Emerald, a relic that allows people to bend reality to their will. We said: “Twenty minutes longer and about 50% louder than its predecessor... Struggles to reprise the winning formula.” Extras include director's commentary, deleted scenes and a six-minute short. Stephen King's 1980 novel about a lass with pyrokinetic powers gets adapted again in **FIRESTARTER** (15 August, Blu-ray/DVD), the work of Keith Thomas, director of excellent Jewish-themed horror *The Vigil*. We said: “Finds nothing new to do, besides throw in a load of dodgy CG flames... Ryan Kiera Armstrong brings a subtle edge to her work, but around her it's clichés all the way.” Extras include an alternate ending, deleted scenes and gag reel. Gloomy Serbian horror **THE POND** (out now, DVD) centres on a widowed professor researching a metaphysical theory on an island. Shot using a muted grey-brown palette and stuffed with symbolism, it has some striking imagery, like a man in a mask made of branches. Admirers of Andrei Tarkovsky may have the necessary patience, but it'll prove too cryptic for the average viewer. Finally, the latest TV releases include **THE MIDWICH CUCKOOS** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD), **OUTLANDER SEASON SIX** (5 September, Blu-ray/DVD) and **RESIDENT ALIEN SEASON ONE** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD).



BABEL

Shadows cast by dreaming spires



RELEASED 1 SEPTEMBER
560 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **RF Kuang**
Publisher **HarperVoyager**

➤ **To generalise wildly for** a moment, genre fiction puts a premium on plot. Lit-fic concerns, such as the internal life of characters or taking time to describe the flowers, are frowned upon. It follows that RF Kuang's decision to riff on the classic Victorian novel with *Babel* is at the very least brave.

That's because while the fiction of Dickens, Eliot or Thackeray doesn't want for incident, it moves at a pace that can seem slow to modern readers. Similarly, *Babel*, certainly in its early chapters, doesn't see the need to hurry. Set in the middle of the 1830s, it invites readers into a world of sea voyages, dons talking sagely, and afternoon tea.

All of which might convey a sense of pastiche if it weren't for the 21st-century sensibility that animates the novel. From the moment the book's chief protagonist, Robin Swift (the anglicised name he chooses for himself), loses his mother in a cholera epidemic in Canton, it's

clear Kuang isn't so much celebrating the classic novel as using its form to explore privilege, colonialism and the way power works. The longer we readers look around this alternate take on the 19th century, the more we're exposed to its injustices.

Swift is a classic outsider. Brought to England by one Professor Lovell, a quietly monstrous father figure, he's hotheaded to be an academic. At Oxford, Swift trains at the Royal Institute of Translation – colloquially, *Babel*. It's here where the most talented scholars learn how to work enchanted silver bars. By revealing meanings via translation, these bars produce magical effects, and their use underpins the growing power of the British Empire.

If this seems an overly complex engine for a fantasy, it actually works far better on the page than you might initially imagine, in part because those who grew up speaking foreign languages have key advantages in silver-working. This sets up an inherent tension in the book, in that the Empire is constantly in danger of having to rely on those it exploits. The idea that translation is a kind of betrayal recurs.

At Oxford, Swift – in the company of Victoire, Letty and Ramy, fellow misfits for being the “wrong” ethnicity and/or gender – gradually comes to see his work as exploitative. Matters come to a head when the quartet uncover a plan to force China to buy opium, an idea taken from the historical record. Working with the anti-imperialist and secretive Hermes Society, Swift and co are drawn into events that will shape the way ahead for Britain – and indeed the wider world.

Pre-publication, Kuang's publishers have referenced Donna Tartt's study of academia *The Secret History*, and *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, and it's easy to see why. The book shares the former's ambivalence towards privilege and the latter's richness in terms of world-building.

Another way to view *Babel* is to see it as a kind of anti-steampunk novel. There's no underlying nostalgia for empire here –

“ Ultimately leaves you feeling punched in the face ”

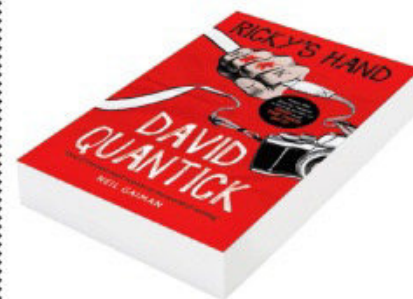
precisely the opposite. *Babel's* concerns are with whether you can change a system from within, or whether ultimately any push against entrenched interest groups inevitably involves violence.

There's a risk here, which *Babel* doesn't entirely avoid in its later chapters, of characters too obviously embodying different perspectives on the issues the book raises. Nevertheless, it says much about the power of Kuang's writing that, for all that she's so clearly animated by ideas, *Babel* never comes across as didactic.

Rather, here is a novel that lulls you with the rhythms of Victorian fiction, but ultimately leaves you feeling punched in the face by the injustices of the world and, moreover, caring deeply about its central characters. It's a book that confirms Kuang as a major talent.

Jonathan Wright

i Kuang drew on Craig Steven Wilder's *Ebony And Ivy*, a book on the relationship between slave owners and US universities.



RICKY'S HAND



RELEASED OUT NOW!

304 pages | Paperback/ebook

Author **David Quantick**

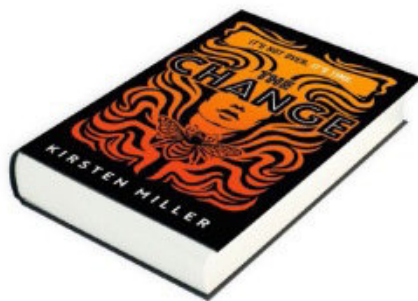
Publisher **Titan Books**

➤ **Imagine waking up one day** with a new hand. It'd definitely make you question your sanity, if not all of reality, right?

In David Quantick's latest (named after the 1980 *Fad Gadget single* – *New Wave Ed*) that's the existential quandary facing paparazzo Ricky Smart. One day, he finds that his hand has been replaced: he can move and feel the new one, there's no pain and no visible scarring, but it's not his hand. He's not alone. A small and nervous support group forms in Miami Beach as people find their body parts – feet, arms, ears, even eyes – are being swapped around. Something deeply sinister is going on, and the only way Ricky's going to figure it out is by winning the trust of pop star Scala Jaq. And she's not keen to team up with the guy who's been making her life hell...

The idea of having something deeply wrong with you that no one else can really see or understand is a wonderfully unsettling one, and the more Ricky investigates, the scarier it gets. He's a great antihero, too. Lazy, cynical and creepy, he's not a guy you'd want to spend time with, and yet Quantick makes him almost likeable (if only because he's the lesser of all the evils going on here).

Smart and snappy, horrifying and hilarious, this book is just as spiky as you'd expect from a writer for the likes of *The Day Today* and *Brass Eye*, and if it hasn't already been optioned for the big screen, expect it to be soon. **Sarah Dobbs**



THE CHANGE

★★★★★

► **RELEASED** 18 AUGUST

480 pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

► Author **Kirsten Miller**

► Publisher **HQ**

☛ **There's no doubt about it,** this is one angry book. It's the story of three middle-aged women – Nessa, a black widow who can see the spirits of the unquiet dead; Jo, a married Jewish gym owner whose hot flushes can literally melt metal; and Harriett, a white woman who around menopause lost her husband and her advertising job and went the whole way into free-loving, poison-growing wild woman territory. They're investigating various cases of missing girls whom no one else seems interested in finding or identifying.

Kirsten Miller has no hesitation in pointing out the misogyny that held the characters back in their lives, from being passed over for promotion or mistaken for a secretary, to outright gropings. In Nessa's case, the issue of racism is also raised. On occasion this stress on misogyny in both thought and deed can lead to characters, male ones in particular, feeling like caricatures.

Nessa and Jo will definitely grow on you, however. And possibly the most horrifying thing of all is that the central mystery may at times feel highly implausible – but then you consider certain high-profile real-life cases and realise it's not that far from reality. You might just be ready to melt metal yourself after that.

Miriam McDonald



THE UNDERTAKING OF HART AND MERCY

A dead sweet romance

★★★★★

► **RELEASED** 25 AUGUST

336 pages | Paperback/ebook

► Author **Megan Bannen**

► Publisher **Orbit Books**

☛ **What do you get if you take** a grab-bag of the most popular YA fantasy tropes and use them to write a story about a couple of lonely thirtysomethings instead? Well, if you're lucky, you might just get something like *The Undertaking Of Hart And Mercy*.

Ralston Hart is a marshal, tasked with making sure the shambling undead "drudges" don't cross the boundaries of the netherworld to wreak havoc in the real world. Mercy Birdsall is an undertaker, whose job includes elaborate rituals that ensure the dead who pass through her morgue won't rise again. The two of them hate one another on sight, but when they accidentally begin an anonymous correspondence, they're drawn together...

Megan Bannen's worldbuilding is fascinating: Hart and Mercy inhabit the kind of small town that'll feel familiar no matter where you're from, except that

there are talking animals wandering about. Despite the odd conversational infodump, the unveiling of her world's secrets feels organic. It's colourful and imaginative, but in a macabre, spooky kind of way; it's complex and detailed without ever making the reader feel overwhelmed by a dizzying array of facts.

Equally as slow-burning – and just as delightful – is the romance. Hart and Mercy are both adults, so they have their fair share of baggage (not least, in Hart's case, the possibility that he's an immortal demigod). There's angst aplenty, but beyond the supernatural trappings, many of the obstacles in true love's path are based on the kind of concerns many of us have or will have to deal with. It's a genuine pleasure to watch these characters overcome all of that to find joy.

Ultimately, this is an anxiety blanket disguised as a novel: warm and soft, with just enough weight to make it feel like a comforting hug. **Sarah Dobbs**

i Bannen named locations after towns in Kansas. Her dad grew up in Bushong, and her Grandma was from Herington.



THE BOOK EATERS

★★★★★

► **RELEASED** 18 AUGUST

295 pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

► Author **Sunyi Dean**

► Publisher **Harper Voyager**

☛ **If you're reading this, it's** likely that you love a good book – maybe you even feel like books are as essential as food and air. Well how about a world in which, to some people, that really is the case?

Devon Fairweather is a "Book Eater", part of a group of families who literally feed on books. But sometimes – rarely – an Eater child is born who feeds on minds, not words, needing to consume other people to survive. Devon's son Cai is a Mind Eater, and rather than give him up to slavery or death, she goes on the run, trying to find sources of the drug Redemption, which will enable him to eat books instead of brains. The difficulty, of course, is keeping Cai alive and fed until then...

It's a pun made on the cover of the novel, but this really is a tale you'll devour. The world-building is fascinating, and the characters are wonderfully complicated and real. Its one flaw is the troubling morality at the heart of Devon's quest: Devon does feel guilt and remorse for the people she feeds to Cai, but there's still little sense of justice for those lives. It's Cai, more than her, who feels the horror of what he does, and it's his desperation to never feed again that redeems it.

This is a tale of the fierce love of a mother for her child, and her absolute inability to do anything other than save him.

Rhian Drinkwater

THE MAN WHO LEAPT THROUGH FILM

Beauty And The East



► **RELEASED** 18 AUGUST

272 pages | Hardback/ebook

► Author Charles Solomon

► Publisher Abrams

There are few names in the world of modern Japanese animation quite as exciting as Mamoru Hosoda. With films like *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time*, *Wolf Children* and *Belle*, he directs anime that is as heartfelt as it is formally ambitious.

The Man Who Leapt Through Film (subtitled *The Art of Mamoru Hosoda*) charts his journey from

directing Digimon movies to setting up his own studio, Studio Chizu. Featuring quotes from Hosoda and key collaborators, the book is structured via the production histories of Hosoda's six biggest films, which are accompanied by a selection of beautiful artwork.

Author Charles Solomon paints each film as a milestone in Hosoda's life (*Wolf Children* was inspired by the death of his mother; *Mirai* by the birth of his daughter), while guiding the reader through the difficulties of animation. In *Mirai*, a new kind of

house had to be designed from scratch; in *Summer Wars*, animating complex shots of crowds challenged animators; while inspirations for *Belle*'s locations had to be scouted through the use of Zoom, due to the pandemic.

Although occasionally light on detail (Hosoda's firing from *Howl's Moving Castle* feels glossed over, for example), it's a well-written overview of a remarkable career. **Stephen Kelly**

i Costume designer Daisuke Iga made real versions of clothing from *Wolf Children*, so animators could see how fabric moved.

BULLET TIME A BOOK IN BULLET POINTS



PULP POWER

► **RELEASED** OUT NOW!

352 pages | Hardback

► Author Neil McGinness

► Publisher Abrams

● A stylish celebration of the Shadow, Doc Savage and other pulp magazine adventurers of the '30s that inspired the first wave of superheroes.

● There's a wealth of art here, from gloriously lurid painted covers to interior illustrations to the paperback reprints that showcased the work of James Bama and Jim Steranko.

● Detailed histories tell the stories behind the Street & Smith characters – including such lesser-known heroes as the Whisperer and the Skipper.

● Comic books and other spin-offs are covered – look for the Shadow boardgame!

● Frank Miller provides an eloquent foreword, revealing the connection between the pulps and his creations *Sin City* and *The Dark Knight Returns*. **NS**



The Boy And The Beast's Kumatetsu.

FACE PATTERN VARIATION # 8



A preliminary study of Belle, by Jin Kim.



Kageichi Akiya art of Belle's Dragon.

MAN WHO LEAPT © STUDIO CHIZU, PULP POWER © CONDÉ NAST



ION CURTAIN

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

336 pages | Paperback/ebook

► Author Anya Ow

► Publisher Solaris

➤ **While reading *Ion Curtain***, you can't shake the sneaking suspicion that the punning title came before the plot. A serviceable but formulaic space opera, it doesn't bring much new to the genre beyond its basic set-up: a future where space is divided into two great, opposing empires that originated on Earth – the VMF, which grew out of the Russian Federation, and the Asian-rooted UN (China having been the first country to gain a colonial foothold in space).

These empires stretch across the galaxy using jump gates. But the balance of power could potentially shift when the VMF develops Artificial Super Intelligences (ASIs) that give their warships the ability to make autonomous jumps without the need for gates. There's one major problem: corners cut in the development of the ASIs have resulted in a fleet of sentient rogue warships with an unfortunate love for mass destruction.

There's some spritely action, a bunch of lively, pan-LGBTQ-spectrum characters, exotic Asian mysticism, space pirates and super-spies, which is all good fun. But the threadbare world-building, humdrum prose and ships with long, silly names make it feel like a lift muzak cover version of an Iain M Banks Culture novel. It doesn't help that it ends on a cliffhanger, following an action scene that's certainly big, but oddly feels nothing like a climax. **Dave Golder**



DEAD WATER

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

512 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook

► Author CA Fletcher

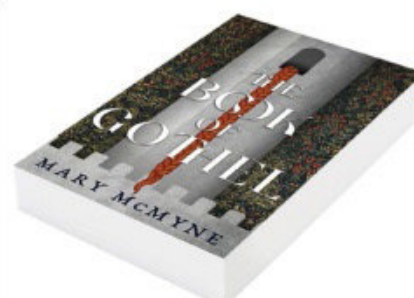
► Publisher Orbit Books

➤ **CA Fletcher clearly has** a thing about islands. His previous novel, *A Boy And His Dog At The End Of The World*, began on one, in the aftermath of an apocalyptic event. *Dead Water* is set in the Hebrides and the present day, but shares a similar focus on isolation and societal collapse.

A body has washed up on the shore of a remote Scottish isle, bringing with it an infection that makes people violently angry. But this is no mere virus: the destruction of a Viking cairn reveals an ancient text and the implication that a supernatural evil is at work. Cut off from the mainland, the community begins to fall apart.

When *Dead Water* gets going it's terrific; a tense and creepy thriller with an atmosphere thick with sea salt and dread. There's echoes of both John Carpenter's *The Fog* and *Doctor Who* stories like "The Curse Of Fenric" and "The Waters Of Mars". It requires patience to get to that point, though, with the first half of this fairly lengthy novel dedicated to dwelling on the grief and anxieties of its sprawling cast of damaged characters.

Fletcher writes beautifully, but the slow pace and constant probing at past traumas makes for a grim, exhausting read at times. It's only when the supernatural mystery takes centre stage and islanders are forced to finally act that this book about death truly comes alive. **Will Salmon**



THE BOOK OF GOTHEL

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

400 pages | Paperback/ebook

► Author Mary McMyne

► Publisher Orbit Books

➤ **There's been a glut of fairy** tale reimaginings in recent years, most of which do little more than defang the villains that gleefully terrorised generations of children.

Here it's Gothel, the evil sorceress from *Rapunzel*, who undergoes a make-over. When we meet her, she's a girl called Haelewise, the daughter of a midwife with an unnatural gift to sense souls and the thin boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead. After her mother dies, Haelewise leaves her village to seek out the witch in the woods and become her apprentice.

There's nobility in wanting to give one-dimensional villains their own voice – especially villainous women, whose stories are marred by the kind of misogyny that still feels very current (they're hysterical; they're envious of younger women; they're home-wreckers and man-stealers; they're evil bitches). And Mary McMyne does a wonderful job in making us care about Haelewise, a girl who's hounded and harassed just because she doesn't fit in.

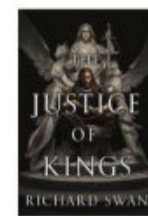
Unfortunately, the book drags, feeling far too long, while the imagery that makes *Rapunzel* so frightening is pushed to the background. At times it's a delicate and riveting coming-of-age folk tale; at others it's hard not to pine for a thornier story about a ferocious, unapologetic witch who revels in her malice. **Kimberley Ballard**

REISSUES

Silvia Moreno-Garcia's **CERTAIN DARK THINGS** (★★★★★, 1 September, Jo Fletcher Books) is set in an alternate timeline where the world discovered the existence of vampires in 1967. Here, every culture's version of vampire mythology is real – they're just different



species. When a feud between two warring clans breaks out in Mexico City, criminals and cops join forces. We said: "Overly-familiar lore seems fresh again, and vampires become frightening again... The star-crossed romance is both sweet and horrifying." An investigator and judge who can talk to the dead is the protagonist of Richard Swan's **THE JUSTICE OF KINGS** (★★★★★, 25 August, Orbit). It centres on the murder of a provincial noblewoman – a case



which reveals a conspiracy stretching to the very top of imperial society. We said: "Swan's fictional

universe arrives fully formed – internally consistent and utterly believable... A contender for fantasy debut of the year." Finally, Xiran Jay Zhao's YA book **IRON WIDOW** (★★★★★, 8 September, Rock The Boat) may be loosely based on the rise of Wu Zetian, China's only female emperor, but is a sci-fi tale. In its world, gigantic transforming robots use female energy, draining



women until they die. Its 18-year-old heroine is out for revenge on the pilot who killed her sister. We said: "Not so much a book as a warning to the patriarchy: use women at your peril. Especially women in skyscraper-sized robots."



THE FIRST BINDING

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 18 AUGUST**

832 pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

► Author RR Virdi

► Publisher Gollancz

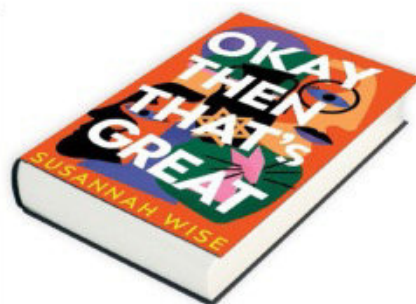
☞ **There's no denying this** is a beast of a book: the lead character, Ari, is not just a storyteller but *the* Storyteller, and its 800-odd pages contain the stories he tells and those he hears, as well as the story about his life in the present. And this is just the first volume in a series called Tales Of Tremaine.

The start feels grindingly slow, with Ari coming to a Mediterranean-feeling town and settling in, telling people at an inn one of their own legends in literally magical style. Stick with it, though: the stories are more than window dressing. Ari is looking for the truth about an ancient evil, a truth that is most likely to exist in story form, but as he and others relate myths and histories to one another, common elements allow you to sense the path the story you are reading will eventually take.

The most substantial and enjoyable story of all is the one Ari tells in private to a beautiful singer: the story of his childhood, from a lowest-caste orphan to student at the Ashram, where he studied "binding", a sort of magic.

Some elements are definite clichés, from the incredible beauty of the singer to the rich school bully at the Ashram, but the pattern woven by the recurring elements is beguiling. You'll want to sit down with this Storyteller again.

Miriam McDonald



OKAY THEN THAT'S GREAT

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

320 pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

► Author Susannah Wise

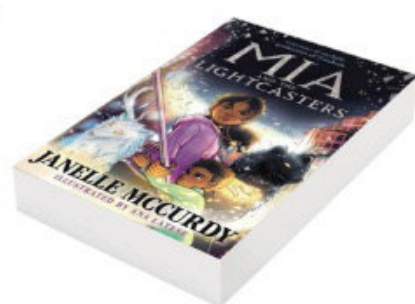
► Publisher Gollancz

☞ **Grief. It's a funny old thing,** isn't it? Hilarious, even. If your response to this question is "Er, no, not really...", then welcome to the club.

Marnie is having a crisis. She's a poet with a 20-year case of writer's block, her Jewish parents have become born-again Christians, and the therapist she sees every day can't even remember her name. Worst of all, her twin daughters are about to turn 18, which is bringing back long-repressed memories of her twin sister Perdita. She died tragically just before their own joint 18th birthday, but Marnie is nonetheless convinced she has seen her, in the present, doing mundane things like parking a car or visiting the supermarket.

Oh, and occasionally she wakes up with a penis, plus long-dead Kiwi writer Katherine Mansfield keeps inviting her round for vodka and shagging. Is she losing it, or switching between timelines in the multiverse?

Susannah Wise's novel charts a course, sort of, between a serious study of mental illness and satirical middle-class comedy. But it's an uneasy mixture at best, and the result is neither one thing nor the other; the absurdism undercuts the weight of the breakdown, and the pain makes the humour ring hollow. The skewering of talking therapy is spot on, though. **Nic Clarke**



MIA AND THE LIGHTCASTERS

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

416 pages | Paperback/ebook/
audiobook

► Author Janelle McCurdy

► Publisher Faber & Faber

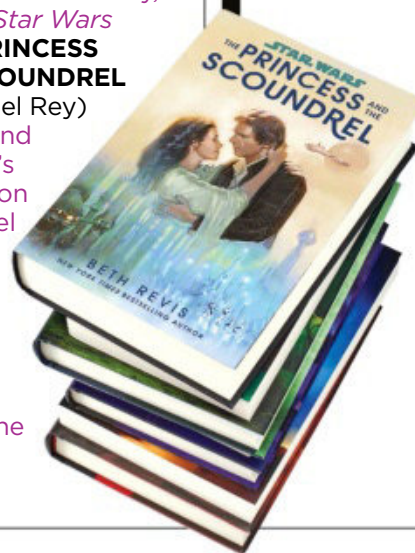
☞ **Imagine a bad guy so, well,** bad that he can blot out the sun, going from city to city and squishing daylight forever. That's the Reaper King for you, although he was eventually banished to another realm, never to be seen again. Unfortunately, teenager Mia is about to find out that he's on the way back, Voldemort style. First, though, she has to tame and magically bond with an "umbra" – a creature made of shadows and stars – and help her little brother and her friends escape an attack on her city.

Debut author Janelle McCurdy showcases some creative world-building in this middle-grade fantasy, and her diverse characters are brought to charming life through Ana Late's evocative illustrations. But the book is let down, particularly towards the end, by a tendency to rush the plot and sometimes muddled, unpolished prose. Mia and her friends are well-rounded one minute, cliché-spouting ciphers the next.

Also frustrating is the fact that the magical, supposedly terrifying "umbras" sit flatly on the page, stubbornly refusing to feel special when these bizarre creatures should be the main selling point. With sequels on the way, hopefully McCurdy can sharpen her writing skills to live up to the fascinating world she's created. **Jayne Nelson**

ALSO OUT

There's plenty more books we couldn't squeeze in. Stephen King is namechecked in the PR for Ronald Malfi's **BLACK MOUTH** (out now, Titan). It features a group of friends returning to their home town to confront a figure they first encountered as teenagers (in this case, a creepy magician). Now, where have we heard that before? Expect explosive battles, romance and glam in Alex White's space opera **AUGUST KITKO AND THE MECHAS FROM SPACE** (out now, Orbit). Can gay jazz pianist Gus Kitko and nonbinary rock star Ardent Violet help save humanity from the AI-powered giant robots hell-bent on destroying humanity? Fingers crossed. The latest *Doctor Who* novel for younglings (ages 9-12) features Tom Baker's Doctor. Paul Magrs's **THE RETURN OF ROBIN HOOD** (out now, BBC Children's) sees the Time Lord meeting a now disenchanted Robin Hood. There's a new Sheriff of Nottingham out to get the outlaws, and the shape-shifting Mother Maudlin is spinning her magic... Quatermass creator Nigel Kneale's 1949 collection **TOMATO CAIN** (out now, Comma Press) has been out of print for yonks. Be aware: most of these 32 short stories are realist vignettes of rural life on the Isle of Man. Maybe five or six qualify as fantasy/horror, such as the haunted house tale "Minuke". Mark Gatiss provides an introduction. Of course he does. Finally, Beth Revis's *Star Wars* novel **THE PRINCESS AND THE SCOUNDREL** (16 August, Del Rey) revolves around Han and Leia's honeymoon, on a luxury vessel visiting some wondrous planets. But with Imperial remnants having retrenched, the danger is not yet over...





David Quantick

The former *NME* writer is rocking out to Boston nowadays



OLLY CURTIS

Do you have any personal mementos or knick-knacks on/near your desk?

► I've got a paper flag from the Manic Street Preachers show in Havana that I went to, and a Quantick Family Name history picture that was my dad's.

Do you find it helpful to listen to music while writing? If so, what kind?

► It depends on the book. *All My Colors* was set in the late '70s and had a Richard Bachman vibe, so I played a lot of John Carpenter soundtracks and also a lot of FM

rock like Boston and Kansas. It was great.

How do you deal with writers' block or the urge to procrastinate?

► If I get stuck I just write something – anything – until the horse comes back. As for procrastinating, I just look at my bank account.

Which of your books are you the most proud of?

► I wrote a novel about some people who'd been the model for characters in a children's book, and then I had to write the children's book. If either of those books come out, I'll be really proud of them.

Which of your books was the most difficult to write?

► *Go West*, which required a lot of research into fakes and forgeries. Fun tip I learned: type almost any name into Google and add the word "fake", and 99 times out of 100 something interesting will come up.

Were you a keen reader as a child? Which books were your favourites?

► I was a very, very keen reader. Mostly the great Puffin books – Charlotte

“Type almost any name into Google and add the word “fake””

Sometimes by Penelope Farmer, *Marianne Dreams* by Catherine Storr, the Narnia books. But most of all Joan Aiken's Dido Twite novels, particularly *Black Hearts In Battersea*.

Is there any particular author whose writing ability makes you envious?

► Loads. Jonathan Coe, Neil Gaiman, Kate Atkinson, Joan Aiken, Stephen King, Iain Banks, Kingsley Amis, Ted Chiang...

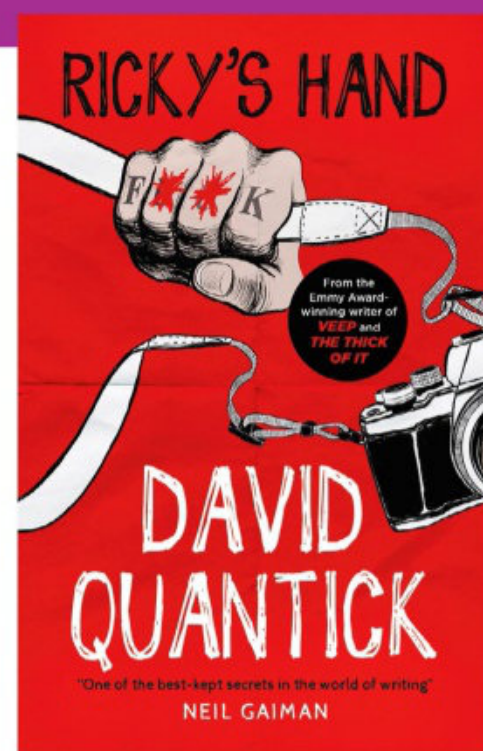
If you could recommend one book that you love, but that's not very well known, what would it be?

► *The Eye of The Beholder* by Marc Behm. It's the greatest, saddest and spookiest private eye novel of all time.

Which SF/fantasy book published in the last year has most impressed you?

► *On The Origin Of Species And Other Stories* by Bo-Young Kim.

What's the biggest misconception people have



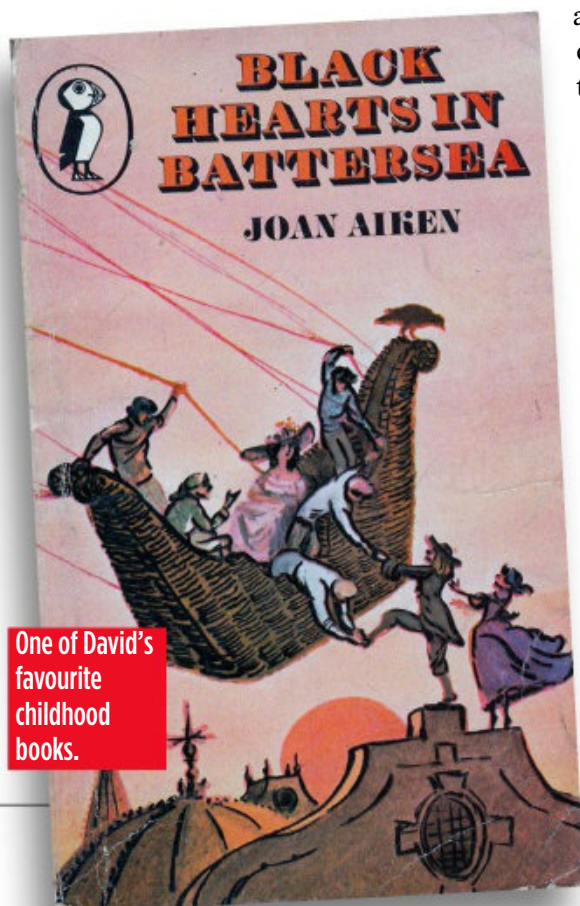
about being a professional author?

► That writers sit around watching television all day in their underpants. I don't have a television in my underpants.

What's the best piece of writing advice you've ever received?

► Once, while drunk, I told Charlie Higson how I envied him for doing all kinds of stuff and how I wished I could write a novel. And he said, in a loud and irritated voice, "Well, fucking do it then!" Which really is the only writing advice anyone needs.

Ricky's Hand is out now, published by Titan Books.



One of David's favourite childhood books.

BATMAN: FORTRESS

Angry aliens vs Caped Crusader



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher **DC Comics**

► Writer **Gary Whitta**

► Artist **Darick Robertson**

ISSUES 1-3 So many Bat-related comics are being released at the moment that any new contenders need something attention-grabbing to stand out from the crowd. In the case of six-issue miniseries *Batman: Fortress*, it's the presence of writer Gary Whitta (best known as the original screenwriter on *Rogue One*), but even that can't make up for all the flaws in this messy adventure.

The story begins with a worldwide blackout caused by the arrival of a mysterious alien spacecraft. With Superman missing for reasons unknown, an assault by the Justice League goes

badly wrong, leaving Batman as the only hope against a potential alien invasion.

However, it's soon revealed that this attack has a connection to Superman and his Kryptonian background, leading to extra complications and – thanks to *Fortress*'s status as an out-of-continuity tale – certain well-known DC characters meeting untimely ends.

The frustrating thing about *Fortress* is that there's a lot to enjoy here. Whitta's journalism and screenwriting background serves him well in terms of crafting set-pieces, with issue one's movie-worthy cold open being a stand-out, as a gang of opportunistic thieves make the mistake of trying to rob Bruce Wayne's mansion during the blackout.

The pace is kept high across these first three issues, the dialogue is often enjoyable and well-crafted, and the overall mystery of whether or not Superman might be descended from war criminals certainly has potential.

Unfortunately, Whitta's handling of tone is nowhere near as effective, and frequently creates moments of full-on whiplash, shifting at a moment's notice from Frank Miller-style grittiness to lurid sci-fi and flippant humour.

This happens as early as issue one, where in the space of two pages, Batman goes from brutally beating a criminal who's just murdered a young couple, to exchanging action-movie quips with Alfred in the Batcave.

Other sequences are just as tonally haphazard, and aren't

“Frequently creates moments of full-on whiplash”

entirely helped by Darick Robertson's art. Best known for co-creating pitch-black superhero satire *The Boys*, Robertson does pull off some highlights, especially in the action sequences, but is let down by the broad, slightly grotesque edge to his quieter, character-based scenes. His visuals end up feeling like a very weird fit for such a relatively straightforward blockbuster-style Batman tale.

While it's possible Whitta and Robertson might redeem themselves and finally nail the tone with their concluding three issues, *Batman: Fortress* is currently landing firmly in the “interesting but ultimately failed experiment” category. **Saxon Bullock**

i Whitta and Robertson previously worked together on the 2019 Image Comics series *Oliver*, a sci-fi version of *Oliver Twist*.



EIGHT BILLION GENIES



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher **Image Comics**

► Writer **Charles Soule**

► Artist **Ryan Browne**

ISSUES 1-3 Having a wish

magically granted has always been portrayed as a potentially dangerous proposition, and new Image Comics title *Eight Billion Genies* expands this concept to ask: what if *everyone* on Earth got a wish at exactly the same time?

This manic eight-issue miniseries follows what happens when the entire population of Earth simultaneously (and for mysterious reasons) all acquire a genie that will grant them each one wish. Chaos immediately breaks loose, and a low-rent bar in Detroit ends up an unexpected safe zone in the madness, its inhabitants riding out the escalating insanity as the worldwide consequences of wishing get bigger and bigger.

Writer Charles Soule and artist Ryan Browne previously collaborated on the anarchic fantasy *Curse Words*, and they're in familiar territory here, putting human nature under the microscope while also delivering a cavalcade of imaginative hyper-strangeness.

From vampires and unicorns to the reincarnation of Jim Morrison and Ernest Hemingway, these first three issues crank the luridness up to impressive levels. While this offbeat comedy won't be for everyone, the remaining five issues are clearly going to head in some adventurously bizarre and mind-bending directions.

Saxon Bullock





FLASHPOINT BEYOND

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher DC Comics

► Writers Geoff Johns, Jeremy Adams, Tim Sheridan

► Artists Eduardo Risso, Xermanico, Mikel Janin

ISSUES 0-3 Sometimes it feels like DC can't let a single successful narrative concept go unexploited. Its latest inevitable revival is a seven-issue follow-up to 2011's universe-changing miniseries *Flashpoint*.

The story that led to the New 52 relaunch, *Flashpoint* featured a dark alternate timeline accidentally created by The Flash, where Atlantis and Themyscira are at war, and Batman is Thomas Wayne, Bruce's embittered and vengeful father. Now, the Flashpoint timeline has been mysteriously recreated, and it's up to Thomas Wayne to discover why, as his whole world marches ever closer to destruction.

Co-written by DC veteran Geoff Johns, this is a slickly entertaining but *exceedingly* unsubtle superhero thriller with an overwhelming number of continuity references. Johns and his co-writers inject a healthy level of doomy energy into these first four issues, while they're helped considerably by excellent art from various artists.

However, now that DC has had frequent successes with out-of-continuity "Elseworld" tales via its Black Label imprint, *Flashpoint Beyond's* bleak edginess doesn't have the same novelty it possessed back in 2011. **Saxon Bullock**



ROCKETEER: THE GREAT RACE

The Jet Set lifestyle

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher IDW Publishing

► Writer/artist Stephen Mooney

ISSUES 1-4 *The Rocketeer* already harked back to the past when it first appeared four decades ago, and this 40th anniversary series is not so much a radical reboot of the late Dave Stevens's 1930s flyboy, but more a subtle update.

Set during the build-up to the Second World War, the four-parter finds the incorrigible Cliff Secord taking on one last challenge: flying an experimental aircraft in a thrilling race from Los Angeles to California. But the competition ends up taking a back seat as he becomes embroiled in a fiendish Nazi plot, and the jetpack itself is only used sparingly – at least until the rollicking final issue – as Cliff concentrates on his flying skills.

Bringing some of the pulpiness of his creator-owned title *Half Past Danger*, Stephen Mooney's plot is entertaining but slightly

rudimentary, while the German caricatures and some of the dialogue would be right at home in a British war comic from the '70s, with the use of terms such as "Englander".

Mooney revises some of the sexual politics, with girlfriend Betty (originally inspired by '50s Queen of the Pin-ups Bettie Page) not just there to hang off Cliff's arm – although he inevitably comes to her rescue in the exhilarating denouement. There's also more to the Amelia Earhart-esque pilot Debbie Seville than meets the eye.

Though never quite able to emulate the sumptuousness of Stevens's work, Mooney imbues his art with a pleasingly earthy grittiness. While there are hints that this could be Cliff's last adventure, let's hope that isn't the case for either him or Mooney.

Stephen Jewell

i Stevens scripted a three-issue Superman crossover, set the night Orson Welles's *War Of The Worlds* aired. But DC rejected it.



THE BEST OF CAT GIRL

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher Rebellion

► Writers Unknown/RAMZEE

► Artists Giorgio Giorgetti, Elkys Nova

COLLECTION The tortured heroine was a staple of girls' comics in the '60s and '70s. These were girls who struggled with cruel parents, school bullies and exploitative adults. Among these woeful tales, the masked sleuth emerged, giving readers a taste of freedom usually only permitted for boys. One such character was Cathy Carter, who helped her father fight crime by donning a suit and calling herself Cat Girl.

Cat Girl mostly fell into obscurity with the decline of girls' comics, but for the first time, five stories have been collated into a new edition. Originally serialised between 1969 and 1971 in *Sally*, they feel a little twee and old-fashioned – Cathy mostly fights cartoonish gangsters, and it's easy to snicker at how cats are *always* referred to as pussies – but it's genuinely fun too, thanks to its throwback slang, Swinging Sixties backdrop and beautiful illustrations.

The only real disappointment here is the one new story, 2020's "Cat Girl Returns". It introduces Cathy's teenage daughter, who finds her mum's old suit and sparks another cycle of vigilante justice. It's obviously a way to introduce young readers to *Cat Girl*, but it's so weighed down with Gen Z trends that it feels shallow, an unnecessary addition to a collection that's all about retro charm. **Kimberley Ballard**

STRAY

Pussed apocalypse



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Reviewed on PlayStation 5

► Also on PlayStation 4, PC

► Publisher Annapurna Interactive

VIDEOGAME **Meowing incessantly** for attention, scratching up the furniture, curling up for a midday snooze – these are just a few of the ways in which you play cat about town in *Stray*. As entertaining as being a furry menace is, though, this is more than a straightforward “cat simulator”, with your friendly feline becoming a central figure in a neat little sci-fi story.

The kitty protagonist in question misjudges one jump and finds themselves falling away from their family, into a walled city that’s home to robotic denizens known as Companions. In the absence of humanity, the

Companions have fostered their own language and culture from the ruins of the world left behind – however, whatever lies beyond the city’s limits is little more than legend to them.

This opening chapter sees your pawed protagonist playfully acquainting themselves with the city’s confined community, from finding sheet music for a street musician to bartering with the local trash merchant. But before long proceedings depart from a sense of whimsy that wouldn’t feel out of place in Studio Ghibli’s *The Cat Returns* with a surprisingly horror-like digression.

The Companions are locked inside with a skittering presence that is ravenously hungry for both metal and hide, so finding a way out for everyone really is plan A. Your dealings with this hungry

menace are genuinely tense (even after you find a means to fight back). It’s a tough act that later threats fail to beat.

Exploration, while still key after this creepy watershed, takes a back seat as the narrative then breathlessly races through a selection of just as compelling new locales. Personally, we would’ve liked to sit a few moments more in each one and sniff the Dreamies.

However, just when you think *Stray* has fully let the cat out of the bag, its story wheels around to claw you across the heart. No kitties are harmed in the making of this denouement, but punchy, bittersweet beats make for an ending that lingers on long after departing this city. **Jess Kinghorn**

i Murtaugh, a cat owned by one of the studio’s co-founders, was a big inspiration. He was found straying near Montpellier.



It's not easy being a kitty in the big old city.



SPACE: 1969



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► 335 minutes | Download

► Publisher Audible

AUDIO DRAMA **For All Mankind**

meets *Futurama* in this 10-part, full-cast sci-fi series. Written and directed by former *Simpsons* showrunner Bill Oakley, it’s set in an alternate history where Kennedy survived his assassination attempt in 1963 and stepped up the USA’s space programme. By 1969 the Americans have a permanent space station in orbit and are one step away from establishing a lunar base.

But things are going far from smoothly, with the President showing increasingly bizarre, megalomaniacal behaviour. When Nancy Kranich (*Russian Doll*’s Natasha Lyonne), a grouchy nurse with a Hulk-like temper, finds the body of Jerry Lewis while on a fag break, she’s drawn into a massive conspiracy that includes patsies, multiple universes, time being rewritten and just about every cultural icon of the era, including Howard Hughes, Lee Harvey Oswald and a bitter Richard Nixon.

It’s inventive and constantly amusing, with some wonderfully quirky ideas, superb performances and impressive production values. But it’s also overlong, eventually becoming swamped by its own convoluted plot, and rarely laugh-out-loud funny.

Even some great meta gags (mainly thanks to Nixon moonlighting as the narrator) become strained in later episodes. It’s no *Hitchhiker’s Guide To The Galaxy*, more like a later BBC series of *Red Dwarf*.

Dave Golder

DOCTOR WHO: INTO THE STARS *Across The Universe*



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

155 minutes | CD/download

► Publisher **Big Finish**

AUDIO DRAMA More than most of the Doctors, Christopher Eccleston's Time Lord is defined by his relationship to Earth. His single TV season rarely strayed too far into the cosmos, favouring instead our planet and associated space stations. The latest Ninth

“Roams far and wide with a trio of intergalactic adventures”

Doctor Adventures box set, by contrast, roams far and wide, with a trio of intergalactic adventures.

Opener “Salvation Nine” throws the Doctor into an encounter with his old enemies the Sontarans. Something's different this time, though. This tribe, known as Niners, are peaceful, inquisitive, and under threat from humans unwilling to accept that these are not the warmongering potato-heads of old. Broadly comic, but with a touch of darkness, the story



puts a rare fresh spin on a race that are fairly well-explored at this point.

Less successful is Douglas Adams-esque comedy “Last Of The Zetacene”, which finds a group of wealthy aliens competing for ownership of the last surviving Zetacene Swine – a truck-sized

pig, basically. If you're not into silly voices and sci-fi jargon, this one won't be for you.

Eccleston is strong as ever, but the conservationist message is blunt – and the jokes only sporadically land.

Finally, “Break The Ice” gives the Ninth Doctor the Christmas adventure he never got to have on television. The TARDIS arrives on a space station during their festive celebrations, but something nasty has taken hold of one of the scientists. A genuinely tense base under siege story, with shades of “The Satan Pit”, it's certainly playing in familiar territory, but it's well-executed and the Bitter King – a malevolent trickster with roots in the Jack Frost myth – is an intriguing new villain. More of him, please.

Will Salmon

i Former *Who* companion Maureen O'Brien, who played Vicki in the William Hartnell era, appears as Selo and the First Gyra.

UFO: DESTRICT POSITIVE! *The Coming Of SHADO*



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

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► Publisher **Big Finish**

AUDIO DRAMA After previously tackling *Space: 1999*, Big Finish's latest Gerry Anderson reboot rewinds to the early days of SHADO, the top-secret organisation defending Earth from organ-harvesting aliens.

If you cringed at Han being awarded the sobriquet “Solo”, you may prefer the TV show's approach. If you're dying to hear Ed Straker coming up with that acronym, or having the brainwave of a film studio front, you'll be in heaven. Introducing Straker as a

test pilot buzzed by a UFO, who is fast-tracked to Commander within days, doesn't really fly. Some tweaks are sensible modernisation, though: second-in-command Alec Freeman no longer hits on every woman in a half-mile radius, for example.

After the opener does the introductions, episodes two and three present missions that neatly distil the essence of the series. “Things We Lost In The Darkness” is a characteristic tale



of a UFO landing in the English countryside, with a woman seeking help after a friend's abducted. Meanwhile, the Skydiver-based “Full Fathom Five” gives Straker a chance to demonstrate that he can make ruthlessly dispassionate leadership decisions when needed.

At times, the series strives for realism: writer Andrew Lane has clearly done his technical research, and knows that, for example, it shouldn't be possible to hear that familiar UFO-in-flight sound effect from a sealed cockpit. At others, it embraces the corn: Lane surely chuckled as he typed out lines like “That's fighting talk... I like it!”. And Nicholas Briggs's Dr Schroeder simply *must* be a homage to the ropery Eastern European accents of a bygone era.

It's consistently entertaining thriller fare, formulaic in the best sense: it knows what the original series is all about, and strives to reproduce it faithfully. Whether it can take Anderson's concepts in surprising new directions remains to be seen. **Calvin Baxter**

i The recording was a reunion for Barnaby Kay (Straker) and Jeany Spark (Virginia Lake), who worked together on *Wallander*.

Blastermind

The SFX quiz



UFOs

The truth is out there! How much do you know about these close encounters of the trivia kind?

Quizmaster Nick Setchfield, Editor At Large

QUESTION 1

Which BBC comedy show spoofed *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind* with a trombone-playing mothership?

QUESTION 2

In the Gerry Anderson series *UFO*, what does the acronym SHADO stand for?

QUESTION 3

Which '70s TV show was inspired by real life US Air Force investigation Project Blue Book?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question

Supply the (US) title that's been cropped from this movie poster.

QUESTION 5

Which 1981 comedy series about UFO spotters was written by *Quatermass* creator Nigel Kneale?

QUESTION 6

Which popular TV personalities starred in 2006's *Alien Autopsy*?

QUESTION 7

In M Night Shyamalan's *Signs*, what natural substance is deadly to the aliens?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question

What's the name of this iconic first contact point?

QUESTION 9

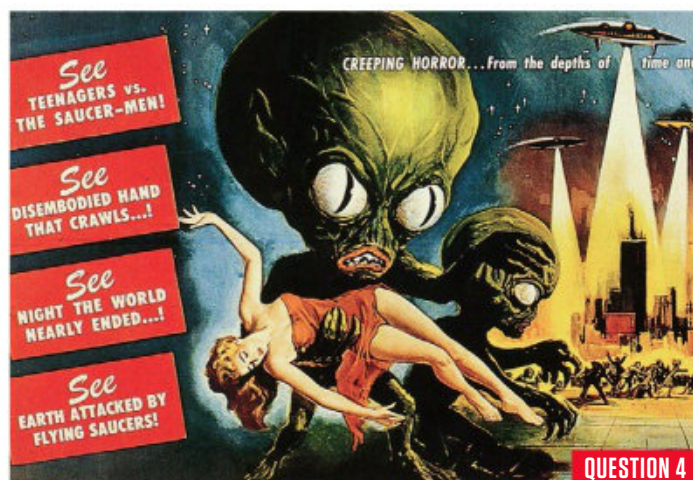
Which US horror writer detailed his alleged true life abduction experience in 1988's *Communion*?

QUESTION 10

Studio 666 stars which American rock band, named after US airforce slang for UFOs?

QUESTION 11

Which behind-the-scenes legend handled the effects on 1956's *Earth Vs The Flying Saucers*?



QUESTION 4



QUESTION 12



QUESTION 8



QUESTION 16

QUESTION 12 Picture Question

Which '00s blockbuster featured this saucer crash victim?

QUESTION 13

Travis Walton's alien abduction memoir *The Walton Experience* inspired which 1993 movie?

QUESTION 14

Which *Doctor Who* writer also wrote the comic book series *Saucer Country* and *Saucer State*?

QUESTION 15

What is the meaning of "EBE", the title of the 17th episode of *The X-Files*?

QUESTION 16 Picture Question

Name the '60s TV show that brought us these "alien beings from a dying planet".

QUESTION 17

Which Dwayne Johnson movie features a UFO-chasing government department called Project Moon Dust?

QUESTION 18

Which of these is the correct title of the 1980 thriller which concerns a high-level UFO cover-up: a) *Hangar 13* b) *Hangar 18* c) *Hangar 22*?

QUESTION 19

In which short-lived '90s conspiracy series was the assassination of JFK revealed as an alien plot?

QUESTION 20

What connects the films *The 400 Blows*, *Jules And Jim* and *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*?

Answers
1 The Goodies 2 Supreme Headquarters Alien Defence Organisation 3 Project UFO 4 Invasion Of The Saucer-Men 5 Kint and Dec 7 Water 6 Devils Tower 7 Whitley Streiber 8 Foo Fighters 9 Ray Harryhausen 10 Indiana Jones And The Kingdom Of The Crystal Skull 11 Fire In The Sky 12 Paul Cornell 13 Extraterrestrial Biological Entity 14 The Invaders 15 Race To Witch Mountain 16 b) Hangar 18 17 Dark Skies 18 François Truffaut directed the first two and starred in the third

How did you do?

Which UFO phenomenon are you?

0-5

Weather balloon

6-10

Blurry photo

11-15

Radar lock

16-19

Abduction experience

20

Anal probe

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

DOCTOR WHO

The moment has been prepared for...

FATE: THE WINX SAGA

SFX goes on set and back to school

**SFX 357
ON SALE
7 SEPT**

TITANS

What next for the
teen supergroup?

SPIDER-MAN

Still web-slinging at 60

DON'T WORRY DARLING

What price utopia?

PLUS!

Monsters, vampires
and shape-shifters -
all in a day's work

IT'S ALL JUST A BUNCH OF...

HOCUS POCUS

They're back, witches!

Sign up to our monthly newsletter to receive a sneak preview! bit.ly/SFXnewsletter

Like A Velvet Glove Cast In Iron



Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor



It was a housemate in my university years who introduced me to *Eightball* (hello Jonathan, if you're out there). I wasn't big on comics, but Daniel Clowes's indie anthology title (which is getting a collected edition release from Fantagraphics on 27 September) was different: a mordant, morbid affair, strongly imprinted with its creator's personality (often in unflattering ways). *Ghost World* later became its break-out strip, but it's *Like A Velvet Glove Cast In Iron*, serialised in issues 1-10, which captured my imagination.

Summarising this bleak, disquieting tale is a challenge. It kicks off with the mostly passive protagonist Clay watching a troublingly odd BDSM second feature in a porno cinema. He tries to find out more about it, but the investigation never really yields any satisfactory answers. Along the way, Clay's beaten up by the police, has a mysterious symbol carved on his foot, is taken in by a Manson Family-esque misandrist cult, acquires a very peculiar dog and an equally strange admirer – a waitress so deformed she resembles an alien's offspring – and, ultimately, has all his limbs ripped off. Cheery.

Clowes didn't know where the story would go when he wrote chapter one, and later spoke of "keeping myself mystified as much as the readers" and "veering off in a lot of different directions". It certainly feels like that – dead ends abound amidst the narrative jazz. But that's not a failing. Unresolved mystery is, to a large degree, the entire point.

Noir is a key ingredient. So is surrealism. At one point, someone answers the door with crustaceans wriggling in their eye sockets, casually explaining that the creatures are cleaning them out. Then there's that dog, which has no orifices, and subsists on one syringe of water a day.

All sounds a bit David Lynch? Clowes might roll his eyes at that (he gave up on *Twin Peaks* after four episodes), but there are certainly parallels: sequences like the one where we zoom in on an attractive woman to see the mites squirming in her hairline seem like quintessentially Lynchian "worm in the apple" stuff.

It's a strip marked by conspiratorial thinking, brutal violence, and perhaps more than anything else, ugliness. Pretty much every supporting character has pock marks, a weak chin, saggy breasts or (in one memorable instance) hair transplant plugs. Clowes seems to have a visceral disgust for humanity. Crisply delineated, its freakshow universe is physically gross but utterly captivating. I couldn't honestly promise that you'll enjoy your time there, but I still recommend paying a visit. ●

Ian would save the fluffy kittens, not the Van Gogh.

Fact Attack!

→ A line of dialogue from Russ Meyer's *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* inspired the title: "You're cute, like a velvet glove cast in iron."

→ The masthead for *Eightball* issue one describes it as "An Orgy of Spite, Vengeance, Hopelessness, Despair and Sexual Perversion".

→ Some toilet graffiti in one scene, reading "Altergott is the Antichrist", is a nod to cartoonist Rick Altergott, a college friend of Clowes.

→ A scene where someone asks "What's the frequency, Kenneth?" references (like the REM song) a 1986 attack on news anchor Dan Rather.

→ A 10-track soundtrack album for *Like A Velvet Glove Cast In Iron* by "Victor Banana" (aka cartoonist Tim Hensley) was released in 1993.

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